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Before You Read...

Hey, lovely reader!

Welcome to the fourth book to my Warriors fanfiction series! After originally only planning to write three books in this series, I decided to push on because of how much you all were loving the books, but also I NEEDED to write more and finish what I started! I really sincerely hope that you all enjoy this fourth book! <3

~ may StarClan light your path ~

- warriorcatlover345

Prologue

[image]

The forest was dark with a never-ending night. Even Silverpelt above was nowhere to be seen, leaving the world above empty and eerie. Tall trees loomed over the ground, their branches stretching like unsheathed claws into the darkness. Thick bushes crowded around their trunks, a tangled mess of leaves and twigs.

From one of the larger bushes, a tiny mouse popped out, its movements quick and jittery. After wandering through the clearing aimlessly for a few moments, it paused, sniffing the air a few times. After a moment of hesitation, it scurried across a narrow dirt trail, worn smooth from who knows how many paws.

Then, out of nowhere, a loud squeak broke the silence. A gray-speckled tom burst from the shadows, his sleek form moving like lightning as he chased down the mouse. The tiny creature zigzagged, claws scrabbling against the ground in a desperate attempt to escape, but it didn't stand a chance. With a swift leap and a clean bite, the cat ended the chase, the mouse going limp in his jaws.

The tom let out a satisfied grunt and dropped his catch, his whiskers twitching as took in the warm, fresh scent. Glancing around to make sure nothing – or no *one* - was sneaking up on him, he decided to lie down and eat before he returned to his duties.

The tom's ears then flicked, and he tried not to flinch, as a deep, booming voice rung out through the forest.

"Ashfur."

The gray speckled tom looked over his shoulder from where he was eating, and he felt his fur begin to bristle as another tom emerged from the bushes behind him. He was a large, muscular tom with dark tabby fur and piercing amber eyes that seemed to be surrounded by scars and scratches.

"Ashfur," the larger tom repeated. "What are you doing back here? These cats can't train themselves!" The cat's voice was slowly rising into a growl, and his claws began to unsheathe as he spoke.

Ashfur shifted uncomfortably in his spot, hoping that his slight fear wasn't showing at all. "I'm sorry, Tigerstar."

Tigerstar let out a snort, his lips curling back to show his large, sharp teeth. "*Sorry* doesn't get these nuisances to where they need to be, you idiot!" he growled. "Get back to the hollow before I shred your ears off."

Despite the speckled tom's quickly beating heart, Ashfur simply gave a curt nod to Tigerstar, stood up, brushed his half-eaten mouse to the side, and began to follow the dark tabby tom back to the main hollow. He found he was trying to push down his embarrassment at hunting that mouse and eating it, despite how hungry he had been.

But the tom gave quick shake of his head to push those thoughts away, and instead decided to simply look around at his strange surroundings, which he had only existed in for about a moon now. After living in the bright forest of ThunderClan by day and sleeping under the shining stars of Silverpelt by night, it had been a bit hard to adjust to.

Ashfur's claws dug into the earth as his mind churned with bitterness. He didn't miss ThunderClan—not the fox-hearted cowards or the brainless fools who called themselves warriors. They had betrayed him, just as Firestar had - exiling him like he was nothing after everything he'd done for them.

The memory of his exile burned like fresh wounds in his chest, fueling the anger that had never left him. It had all started with her —Squirrelflight. The dark ginger she-cat had been the center of his world. He had loved her with every shred of his being, convinced she felt the same for several moons.

But he had been wrong. She had chosen Brambleclaw, ThunderClan's deputy, over him. Ashfur could still see the two of them together, their loving glances, their hunting trips together, the

way that they spoke to each other with such joy. It was like thorns raking across his heart, and it made him want to rip apart everything in his sight.

Squirrelflight had humiliated him and had broken his heart. So he decided to make her suffer – the only thing that he saw fit. He would reflect the pain she had inflicted on him so that she could understand how he felt. That's why he had trapped her kits (or who he had *thought* were her kits) —Jayfeather, Lionblaze, and Hollyleaf —in a blazing fire. He wanted her to feel helpless, to understand the agony of loss.

But in a moment of weakness—no, *idiocy*—he had let them go. He hated himself for it. If he'd killed them, he might have shattered her spirit completely. Instead, he had shown mercy, and mercy had no place in his heart anymore. He had instead decided to humiliate her by planning to tell the Clans about her lie.

Even before that, his hatred had pushed him to darker deeds. He had helped another cat trap Firestar, Squirrelflight's father, in a fox trap. Firestar, the great leader of ThunderClan, had suffered because of him, and Ashfur had relished the thought of Squirrelflight's anguish.

But his revenge had ultimately led to his downfall – the first time. Before he could even manage to share what he knew with the Clans at the next Gathering – someone had foiled his plan, proceeding to instead expose all of Ashfur's plans to bring down Squirrelflight.

"Lilypetal," he hissed, the name dripping with venom. It was her fault. She had exposed him, revealing his treachery to all the Clans during a Gathering. She had stripped away his last chance at redemption, and for that, he had sworn to make her life a living nightmare from that day on.

When he returned to ThunderClan's territory after his exile, determined to claim vengeance on her, his own life was cut short. He had managed to take the life of ThunderClan's beloved medicine cat apprentice – Snowflight. But, Goldenshine, one of his former Clanmates, had struck him down with the help of Jayfeather, ThunderClan's medicine cat.

How had he let those pieces of crow-food defeat him? The thought gnawed at his pride like a festering wound. His claws unsheathed instinctively, digging into the ground as his fury reignited.

Despite Ashfur being killed and now being in the Dark Forest, Ashfur's revenge was nowhere near complete. Squirrelflight, sure, but he was certain now that Lilypetal should – no, *deserved* – to be his main target. Killing her beloved daughter, Snowflight, had been only the first step. However, the memory of Snowflight's lifeless body filled him with grim satisfaction.

But it wasn't enough. Ashfur wanted more. He wanted to break Lilypetal piece by piece, to destroy everything she held dear. Her family, her friends, her very will to live—he would see it all crumble before him. *I am nowhere near done yet.*

Ashfur's thoughts were then interrupted when he heard Tigerstar let out an angry hiss.

Ashfur's ears flicked, and he looked up from where he'd been staring down at the ground. "What's the matter, Tigerstar?"

Tigerstar stopped in his tracks, turning back towards Ashfur to reveal bristled tabby fur and barred teeth. Behind the dark brown tom, Ashfur could just barely see the mob mingled with Dark Forest cats and living Clan cats training in the hollow. "We don't have nearly enough warriors here to train," Tigerstar growled – seemingly half to Ashfur and half to himself. "We need to appoint more."

"I agree, Tigerstar."

A new voice spoke behind Ashfur and Tigerstar. And Ashfur peered past his leader to see a tom that was almost identical to Tigerstar appear through all of the other cats in the training hollow. He had a dark brown tabby pelt, an incredibly muscular body, but instead of dark, menacing brown eyes, his were an eerie ice blue. "We won't get anywhere with this small lot!"

Hm. Fascinating timing.

Ashfur hoped that Tigerstar and Hawkfrost would notice as he narrowed his eyes, letting a smirk emerge across his face.

Luckily, they both did as they both turned to him to search for an answer to their dilemma. "What?" Tigerstar immediately demanded. "Do you already know of another warrior we could train?"

Ashfur nodded, his heartbeat beginning to rise again with the exhilaration that he felt. "Not a warrior, but he's certainly a cat that could become a brilliant one with our training."

Tigerstar narrowed his eyes and exchanged a glance with Hawkfrost. "Show him to me," he then meowed menacingly to Ashfur, his excitement already palpable.

Ashfur immediately whipped himself around and led Tigerstar and Hawkfrost over to a small black puddle that filled where the ground had depressed, leaving an almost black pool of water without any light to reflect off of it.

He simply stared down at it for a moment, trying to almost send it a message through his mind, as he knew he had the power to do. *Come on. Show him to them.*

After a moment of the three toms surrounding the puddle, it let out a ripple, and just as Ashfur had hoped and willed it to, suddenly a cat appeared in the water. He was small, but a strong-looking tom with gray-black fur, a white chest and paws, and strange gray-blue eyes.

Ashfur's eyebrows furrowed when he quickly heard Hawkfrost let out a purr of amusement. "You can't be serious!" Hawkfrost challenged Ashfur. "You do realize that is a *kit*, right?"

"I know that, thank you very much, Hawkfrost," Ashfur muttered bitterly in reply. Not looking at the tom but instead still staring down at the pool.

Out of the corner of his eye, Ashfur could also see that Tigerstar's amber eyes were also fixed on the kit in the puddle. "Shut up, Hawkfrost," the Dark Forest leader barked at his son, to Ashfur's

surprise.

Ashfur's eyebrows then raised as Tigerstar looked up at the gray-speckled tom, his gaze full of darkness and determination. "This is perfect! By the time he's an apprentice, he'll already know how to fight and hunt like a *warrior*!"

Hawkfrost responded just by gritting his teeth and lashing his tail.

Tigerstar then gave Ashfur a sharp nod. "Good choice," he then praised him.

Ashfur tried not to let his indescribable amount of excitement show. "Wonderful. Thank you. Shall I visit him tomorrow at moonhigh and invite him in?"

Tigerstar gave a single sharp nod. "Yes. And if after a few nights he seems like a formidable apprentice, bring him to me."

The dark brown tabby tom then turned around to pad back towards the training hollow, Hawkfrost following. "Don't mess this up."

Oh, I won't. I can't this time.

Ashfur turned away from the leaving cats, simply facing the forest as his heart seemed to soar with so much anger, yet satisfaction and determination all at once.

His revenge had begun.

Chapter 1

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

"Smudge!"

My heart practically dropped at the name that Firestar exclaimed – seemingly just a few moments after ThunderClan returned to camp after the Gathering.

A name that I genuinely thought that I would never hear again, but my heart absolutely soared to hear it. *Oh my freaking StarClan.*

My head was practically a happy fog, and I actually wondered if I was delirious with a lack of sleep as I heard many cats in the camp gasp. And out of the corner of my eye I saw a tom slither through the camp entrance, with two more cats following behind him.

What in the name of...

I then shook my head quickly, getting myself out of my shocked, foggy head full of denial and brought myself to actually look at the cats emerging through the ThunderClan entrance.

And when I did, I seriously thought I was going to soar up into the Silverpelt sky – Firestar had spoken correctly, and that was indeed the black and white pelt that I had once gotten to see all of the time – and honestly, one of the first pelts I remember ever getting to see. *Oh my goodness...*

"Rust-... Firestar!" Smudge exclaimed. And my mouth dropped as he and Firestar ran up to each other, their eyes both glowing with shock and complete delight as they then touched noses.

I continued to stare in complete shock, and I'm sure cats were wondering what the heck was wrong with me as they began to slither from their dens to see what was going on.

They were actually able to *react* to this. I was still processing just how extremely my worlds were colliding right now.

But I absolutely *had* to roll my eyes as I heard Spiderleg call something out. "Who in the name of StarClan is that? He has the scent of a kittypet!"

I forced myself to bring myself all the way back down to earth, but the dark brown tom's words definitely gave me a boost. I narrowed my eyes at my Clanmate as I growled. "That's Smudge, Spiderleg!"

I then turned my head to watch as the black and white tom excitedly exchanged words with Firestar, and my heart seemed to swell as I suddenly felt overwhelmed with emotion. "He's practically the tom who raised me," I then meowed in a voice just barely above a whisper. "I never thought I'd see him again."

Not being able to stand watching for another moment, I practically let out a squeal and pelted forward to where Smudge and Firestar were.

And as I had expected, Smudge flicked his ears and widened his yellow eyes, understandably alarmed that a Clan cat was running up to him like this.

However, just as I had hoped, when he got a better look at me, his jaw practically dropped to the ground, and his eyes widened so much that I thought they were going to tumble onto the ground.

"Lily!?" Smudge then practically yowled, a mix of shock and delight ringing through the camp.

He then let out a breath of relief as we touched noses. For a moment, the camp, the forest, everything melted away, leaving only the two of us and a sea of memories.

"I can't believe it. I mean... what? ...*What?*" he exclaimed, stepping back to get a better look at me. His voice cracked, and his tail trembled. "What in the name of... what are you doing here, Lily?"

"Lily*petal* now, Smudge!" Firestar cut in.

I began to shake my head quickly. "Oh, that's okay, he can call me whatever he would like!" I practically cried out with my overwhelmed emotions. I then nodded back to the housecat. "Smudge, I could say the same to you. How... *how* are you even here? *What?*"

Before he could answer, another voice cut through the reunion.

"The real question is," Sandstorm meowed, stepping forward to stand beside Firestar, "why is he here, and how do *either* of you know him?"

The air in the camp shifted. Tension rippled through the clearing like a sudden storm, and every eye was on us.

My heart began pounding so loudly that I was sure that everyone around could hear it. *ThunderClan, for the love of everything, don't shred Smudge to pieces.*

I turned to look at my Clanmates. Most of them had their teeth bared, claws unsheathed, tails lashing.

Gosh, this was not the welcome I'd hope for for Smudge.

Firestar, clearly trying to temper his excitement, stepped forward and raised his tail for silence. "This is Smudge," he began, his voice steady. "We were friends before I joined ThunderClan."

Dustpelt let out a low growl, and I was shocked to see his amber eyes flash with realization. "This is the kittypet that Tigerclaw caught you with in the forest when you were a warrior, wasn't it?"

The name Tigerclaw sent a shiver through the crowd. Gasps and murmurs followed, cats exchanging uneasy glances.

"What is he doing here?" someone shouted from the back – pretty sure it was Berrynose.

Smudge shuffled his paws, glancing nervously at the other kittypets behind him. I could see the hesitation in his eyes, the weight of standing before so many hostile strangers. But I knew Smudge. He wasn't the bravest cat, but he always found a way to speak his

truth.

"Our housefolk took us up to this lake for the summer," he began, his voice clear and loud, but I could hear a slight shake within it. "They let us outside, and we talked to a rogue. He said cats lived in this forest. I knew the Clans had left the old forest, so we decided to go deeper into the woods. That's when I smelled ThunderClan—*your* ThunderClan—and followed the scent here."

He then let out a sniff, nodding to Firestar and me, his yellow eyes gleaming. "Who knew what I would find once I got here?"

"This is all very lovely," Mousefur meowed from the entrance to her den, her tone sharp, "but can they please leave?"

Murmurs of agreement rippled through the camp. I held back from flashing an individual glare at each and every one of them.

"Gladly," one of the smaller housecats – the black she-cat with green eyes - behind Smudge meowed, already beginning to slink away.

"Wait!" Firestar's voice rang out, silencing the camp.

He turned back to his Clanmates, his expression firm. "These cats will be welcomed, and we will treat them with respect." His gaze swept across the gathered cats, challenging anyone to disagree.

The murmurs didn't stop entirely, but most cats began slinking back toward their dens – I guess giving up the fight. Only Sandstorm, Thornclaw, Graystripe, Leafpool, Squirrelflight, Brambleclaw, and Goldenshine remained.

Firestar turned to me, his green eyes wide as he seemed to recall that Smudge also knew me. "Lilypetal, how in the name of StarClan do *you* know Smudge?"

I took a deep breath, the memories rushing back as if they'd been waiting for this moment. "I met him when I was just a few moons old – back when I was a kittypet," I breathed, looking back at Smudge as gratitude and affection swelled in my heart. "I'd just been adopted from the shelter when he came to my yard and introduced himself."

Smudge's ears perked up, and his whiskers twitched. "She was just a tiny scrap of fur back then," he said, his voice warm with affection as he brushed the top of my head with his tail. "But even then, she had so much spark."

I stared back at Smudge, still overwhelmed with emotion. "Smudge was the first cat I met after I was taken to my new home," I then trailed off, realizing that no words could even *begin* to capture how much of an influence this housecat had had on my early life. "He was the one who showed me around the Twolegplace, he welcomed me... practically *raised* me."

I then had to take a deep breath, trying to regulate my overwhelming emotions. "He was... he was like a father to me."

Smudge blinked, his eyes shining. "I tried my best, Lily. You were such a scared, shy little kit back then. But you were also brave, braver than you knew. I always admired that about you." The black and white tom then took a deep breath himself as he then looked at me, and then scanned his eyes around the stone hollow. "And to see you here... well, let's just say that I'm not surprised at *all*."

I felt a lump in my throat. "You were the only reason I didn't run off to join the Clans the moment I was old enough. You made my life there bearable."

Smudge's tail flicked, and he looked down at his paws. "I was disappointed when your housefolk took you here to the lake," he admitted. "Everyone else was too."

"Everyone?" Firestar asked, his curiosity piqued.

Smudge nodded. "There were other cats back in the forest who knew her. Princess and Cody, for example."

"Princess!" Firestar exclaimed, his eyes lighting up. And when I tilted my head in curiosity, Firestar nodded to me with wide, excited green eyes. "She's my sister!"

My jaw dropped. "Wait—what?!"

Firestar nodded eagerly. "How is she?" he asked Smudge.

"She's just fine," Smudge replied, his tone reassuring. "She wasn't too happy to see me head out, though. I'll bet she's counting down the days until we get back!"

"Oh, sure," Firestar murmured as he gave Smudge a wink.

"And Cody?" Leafpool asked, her eyes bright with recognition. "Did you say Cody?"

When Smudge nodded, Leafpool's face lit up. "I met her back in the forest! She helped our Clan so much when we were struggling during all of the forest destruction. Great StarClan, I miss her every day."

"She and Princess were the last cats I saw before our housefolk brought us here," Smudge added softly.

At the word "us," everyone's attention shifted to the two cats behind Smudge. I peered past Smudge, trying my best to give them a friendly nod that didn't make them run out of the camp in fear.

"This is Pippy and Dusty," Smudge said, flicking his tail toward them. "My housefolk brought them to live with me a couple of seasons ago."

As Smudge spoke about them, the two younger cats looked like they wanted to bolt. I felt a pang of sympathy, remembering how I'd felt when I first arrived in ThunderClan's camp. *They way they look right now captures basically everything that I felt. Wow.*

Goldenshine stepped forward, her golden brown tabby fur gleaming in the moonlight as she stared off at the younger cats, her gray eyes gleaming with kindness. Though, I knew my daughter well, of course – I saw the wariness there. "Hi," she said warmly to Pippy and Dusty.

They exchanged shy glances but managed small nods back to my daughter.

"Well, as much as I would love to stand out here all night and catch up, it's late," Firestar sighed, his eyes gleaming as he looked at Smudge, then turning to Brambleclaw. "Go to Jayfeather and ask

him to prepare nests for these three in his den. They can stay the night."

Smudge looked alarmed. "Oh, we couldn't possibly—"

"It's dangerous to travel the forest at night," Firestar said firmly. "You can leave tomorrow if you wish."

No! Stay here forever! I said only to myself.

Smudge hesitated, but after looking at Firestar, and then looking at me and purring at my dramatic-looking urging look, he finally nodded.

I had to suppress another squeal. *No way! Smudge...* my *Smudge, is spending the night in ThunderClan camp!*

Smudge's yellow eyes then softened, and he gave a nod in gratitude to the ThunderClan leader. "Well then, thank you, Firestar. We will stay the night." He then nodded to me, chuckling as he likely caught my enthusiastic look. "Goodnight, Lily."

"Goodnight, Smudge!" I called out, watching as Brambleclaw then led the kittypets toward the medicine den and feeling my heart sink just a bit.

Firestar turned back to me, clearly sensing my slight disappointment. "We'll talk more tomorrow," he said warmly to me.

I nodded, feeling both honored and overwhelmed. "Thank StarClan."

"By the way," Firestar began, his head tilted. "You let him call you 'Lily.' Are you okay with that?"

I immediately nodded eagerly to my leader and shrugged. "It's what he's always called me," I replied. "I won't make him stop now."

Firestar nodded and let out a small purr of amusement. "Fair enough." He then gave me a nod in farewell and then began to pad towards the Highledge. "However, I don't think I'll do the same. I'd be fine if the name 'Rusty' is never uttered again, in fact."

I purred with amusement, giving a lash of my tail in farewell in return before making my way to my sleeping spot. And when I finally crawled into the warriors' den, Thornclaw, who had left for the warriors den just a few moments before I had, was there waiting for me. He was already curled up in our nest, and his breath was soft and steady, but I could tell he was still awake.

When I padded up to our nest, lied down, and pressed myself against my mate, I felt him shift and saw him open his eyes when I let out a long sigh.

"You okay?" he asked, his voice low.

"Yeah," I whispered back to him as I let my head lay on his shoulder. "It's just... seeing Smudge again.I... just can't believe it."

Thornclaw rested his muzzle against my cheek. "Well, sure. That completely makes sense," he then meowed. "I'm just so shocked to hear how much he had an influence on your life. He was like a father to you?"

"Definitely better than the father I actually have," I muttered to my mate with a sniff. And after Thornclaw let out a quiet chuckle, I let out another sigh. "But yes. When I didn't have the faintest idea of who my parents were at all, he... served as the best possible one I could have had. He's a lot of who I am today."

"Then I am so glad that you're getting to see him after all of this time," Thornclaw purred to me. A purr began to rise in my own throat as he then locked his gaze with mine, his pale blue eyes glowing. "And if he helped make you who you are, then I'm grateful to him."

I simply stared back at the tom for a moment, my heart soaring all over again. "Aw, you're sweet," I whispered before shaking my head in amazement and staring out of the entrance to our den. "He was one of the best, Thornclaw. Truly."

I then widened my eyes, looking back at Thornclaw with curiosity. "I wonder if Firestar would let them stay in the Clan?" I mused aloud, my voice soft in the quiet of the den.

Thornclaw lifted his head from the nest beside me, his eyes gleaming faintly in the dim light. He let out a low sigh, the kind that carried years of memories and unspoken opinions.

"I won't lie," he began, his tone thoughtful, "I'm usually furious when Firestar lets rogues or kittypets into the Clan without a second thought."

"Oh, come on," I sighed, half-mockingly as I gave a roll of my eyes.

Thornclaw snorted, giving me the gentlest of nudges before going on. "I mean, seriously, sometimes it does feel like he's more willing to trust outsiders than the cats who've been loyal to him all their lives."

I gave a soft hum of acknowledgment, sensing there was more he wanted to say.

"And you know what? I didn't show it the first day she came," Thornclaw continued, his voice dropping to a near whisper as if he didn't want the others to hear, "but when Firestar brought in this brown-and-white tabby she-cat and said she'd be staying with us... I was furious at first."

I turned my head to look at him, trying to hide the smirk tugging at the corners of my mouth. "Oh really?" I said, my tone teasing. "That must've been so hard for you, having to put up with such an unbearable cat."

Thornclaw huffed, but there was a glint of humor in his eyes. "You're lucky I didn't chase you off myself," he shot back, though his tone was light.

"Lucky indeed," I replied with mock seriousness, letting out a small snort.

Thornclaw's expression softened, and before I could say anything else, he leaned in and touched his muzzle to my cheek. His warmth sent a rush of affection through me, and I felt my heart swell at the simple gesture.

"Who knew," he murmured, his voice low and sincere, "that she'd

turn out to make me so happy?"

I felt heat rise beneath my fur, and I rolled my eyes to hide the way my heart was fluttering. But the soft purr that escaped me betrayed my feelings. "Stop it," I murmured, though my tone was affectionate.

Thornclaw chuckled, his deep voice rumbling in the quiet. He gave my cheek one last gentle lick before lowering his head back onto the nest. "It's almost dawn," he said softly, his voice beginning to grow drowsy. "We should get some sleep."

I glanced toward the entrance of the den, where the faintest traces of light were beginning to creep through the leaves. The moon was sinking behind the trees, its pale glow giving way to the promise of a new day.

"I suppose you're right," I murmured, letting out a huge yawn.

I nestled deeper into the soft moss of the nest, Thornclaw's steady breathing lulling me into a sense of peace. For a moment, I just lay there, listening to the sounds of the forest waking up—an owl's distant hoot, the rustle of leaves in the breeze, the faint stirrings of my Clanmates in their nests.

And with the warmth of Thornclaw beside me and the scent of ThunderClan all around, I let myself drift off, my head swirling with anticipation and excitement for tomorrow as everything turned black.

Chapter 2

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

It felt like I had only just closed my eyes when the sun dragged me back into consciousness. My eyelids felt heavier than a boulder, but the absence of Thornclaw's warmth beside me immediately snapped me awake. I blinked at the empty spot where he'd been, his nest already cool. *Great. Either he was up ridiculously early or I'd overslept.*

I got up quickly and stretched, my claws scraping the moss as I got to my paws. The warrior's den was quieter than usual, with only a few cats still tucked into their nests. I would bet all of the prey that I'd eat for the rest of my life that the morning patrols were already sent out.

Feeling a bit rushed, I burst out of the warriors den and I pushed my way into the clearing. My ears twitched as I caught sight of Firestar near the Highledge—and there, sitting beside him, was a familiar figure that made my heart skip a beat – I'd almost forgotten through my grogginess that he was here.

Smudge!

The black and white tom was chatting animatedly with his old friend, his whiskers twitching in excitement as I padded up to the two of them. *Firestar had said that we would all talk more tomorrow. That's happening now, right? Right?*

Too excited to even speak, I simply sat down in front of them, wrapping my tail around my paws and waited patiently. But as if sensing my presence, Firestar turned his head towards me, blinking with delight and surprise. "Lilypetal, welcome! We were wondering when you were going to wake up."

I let out a snort. "Don't worry, I surprised myself too," I muttered.

Firestar let out a purr of amusement and exchanged a humored glance with Smudge. "No worries! I'm glad you got some rest."

"Me too!" Smudge meowed warmly. I then let out a *mrrow* of laughter as Smudge then narrowed his yellow eyes at me. "You've been getting sleep while you're here, right?"

Overwhelmed with affection at seeing Smudge badger me just as he had when I was younger, another purr rumbled in my throat and I gave the tom a nod. "I have, don't worry," I reassured him before giving a shrug. "Guess I really needed it last night."

"Exactly," Firestar agreed as he gave a nod. "Well, now that you're up, why don't you join us?" As my eyes widened with excitement and amazement, the ThunderClan leader gestured with his tail toward the Highledge and the den beneath it.

Smudge and I then exchanged an ecstatic glance, his tail swishing behind him as Firestar led us into his den. Once we were all up there and settled down, I couldn't help but take a deep breath as my emotions seemed overwhelming in the best way all over again. I could feel a storm of emotions brewing—joy, curiosity, and maybe a touch of nostalgia.

Truthfully, it had been *so* long since I'd thought about my kittypet life. Now here was Smudge - a piece of that life, sitting right in front of me like a dream I hadn't realized I missed.

"Anyway, Lilypetal, before you showed up we were just talking about Princess," Firestar began, his green eyes gleaming. "You said you knew her back when you lived in the forest, didn't you?"

I nodded eagerly. "Not as well as Smudge did, but yeah, I did!" I then nodded to Smudge, who was listening to me with gleaming eyes. "She was an absolute sweetheart, I remember."

I then nodded to Firestar. "I'm honestly not surprised at *all* to hear that you two are siblings."

"Oh, I wasn't either! Two pretty special cats, if you ask me." After Firestar gave a roll of his green eyes, Smudge then looked excitedly

between the two of us. "Gosh, she'll be so excited to hear that I found you guys!"

Firestar then nodded to his friend, his eyes having the smallest bit of urging. "Tell her I say hi when you get back, will you?"

Smudge nodded and gave a snort, as if that was silly request. "Of course I will, you silly!"

Firestar rolled his eyes again, giving his friend a light nudge with his tail before then nodding towards me, his eyes now full of curiosity. "I have to say, I'm still processing the fact that you two know each other so well!"

Smudge and I exchanged a look and purred. "Of course we do!" Smudge meowed. "Like I said yesterday, she was just a tiny kit when I met her. Again, quiet as a mouse at first, but I brought her out of her shell. My charming personality worked wonders."

"Charming personality?" I echoed with a snort as I gave the tom a teasing look. "I don't remember meeting you at all. You must've been *really* unforgettable."

Smudge put a paw to his chest in mock offense. "You wound me! But seriously, you were so little." He then let out a sigh and began to shake his head. "I cannot even begin to tell you how weird... but how *incredible* it is to see you all grown up... and here!" He then nodded to Firestar. "Being led by my best friend!"

I then let out a huff, his eyes wide with amazement. "Gosh, this is all so awesome. I'm so glad that I came."

Firestar and I then both exchanged a look of amusement and shared a *mrrow* of laughter. Smudge was right – this was *awesome*. Just getting to sit here and talk – reminisce about our pasts... it was something that I honestly wished I had done a bit more since I'd joined the Clans. While thinking about living the lifestyle of a kittypet wasn't my favorite, it was cats like Smudge that made it enjoyable and made me look back at it fondly.

Almost as if Smudge could read my mind, he gave a sniff, winked at

Firestar and then said - "The kittypet life is still pretty good, you know," he said, his voice tinged with mischief. "I don't know what made you all leave it."

Firestar and I both purred in amusement. "It was good while it lasted, I suppose." I said diplomatically.

Firestar nodded. "Warmth, food, comfort—it was all there. But I wouldn't trade my life here for anything."

I gave a nod to Firestar, resonating with his words completely. Sure, the beds were soft, and the bowls were always full, but it came with its own set of problems—like being dragged to the vet (ew) or stuck behind Twoleg walls (gross). No, I'd always dreamed of something more, though I never thought those dreams would lead me here – clearly, Smudge knew that and had always known that. It was his support at the time that had been a big influence in me finally deciding to take the plunge. *So, among everything else, he's almost the reason why I'm here too,* I realized. *Goodness, he's been a part of my life and has influenced it for longer than I realized.*

I then gave a flick of my ears as I nodded to Firestar, now overwhelmed with curiosity as I tried to put the timeline of my life together. "When exactly was I taken by the Twoleg?" I asked the ThunderClan leader, the question bubbling up unexpectedly.

Firestar's tail flicked as he thought. "Hmm. It was after the BloodClan battle, but before Brambleclaw and Squirrelflight disappeared to go on their journey to the sun-drown place. Your mother was still new to the Clan."

"Wait," Smudge interrupted, his eyes widening as he looked at me. "*Taken?*"

My mouth dropped as I looked back at Smudge, realizing that he had no way of knowing what had happened to me just a bit after I was born – I had been too young to remember when he met me as a kit. "Oh my goodness, I forgot that you didn't know! You couldn't have!" I exclaimed to Smudge with wide eyes. "Smudge, you'll never believe it – but I wasn't always a kittypet. My mother – Mistpelt, you'll *have* to meet her - gave birth to me in ThunderClan, but a

Twoleg snatched us up just a couple of moons after I was born.

I then had to take a moment to purr with amusement as Smudge managed to look even more shocked than he had already. "We were separated, and that's when I was taken to the shelter to be adopted."

Smudge's mouth fell open. "*Wow*, Lily. Wow, I never knew, what the heck? That is crazy," he meowed, giving a bewildered look towards Firestar before looking back at me, his yellow eyes now more thoughtful. "But now that I think about it, that makes complete sense. You did just kind of just appear one day. No mother, no littermates, just you."

My chest tightened at the memory. My kithood had been a whirlwind of chaos—born in the forest, stolen away, and thrust into a world of Twolegs and kittypet rules. I could barely remember my mother's face or the scents of the forest from back then. *But thank goodness that I was able to recall everything and meet Mistpelt so much later.*

"So then you were able to meet and get to know your birth mother then. That's fantastic," Smudge purred to me, and I nodded in agreement. Love began to swell in my heart as I thought about my mother – Mistpelt. The fact that I got to meet her and know her after all that I had been through... I couldn't even begin to describe how thankful I was for that.

I then looked back at Smudge as he seemed to be thinking again. And I had to admit, his next question made my fur prickle. "Did you ever find out who your father is?"

Oop.

Firestar and I exchanged a look, and my heart sank. I took a deep breath. "Yes," I said carefully.

Smudge tilted his head, clearly noticing the change of energy in the den. "Who?"

Firestar spoke up, his voice quiet as he glanced at me briefly again. "Smudge, do you remember the leader of BloodClan? Scourge?"

Smudge blinked, his eyes wide again. "The tiny guy? Scourge?"

I flinched at the name, my tail curling tightly around my paws. Smudge's eyes grew impossibly wide as realization dawned.

"No way..." he breathed, his head slowly turning to look at me again. "How could such a weed create such a sunflower?"

I let out a shaky laugh. "Guess I'm full of surprises," I purred, giving a bashful shrug.

I then quickly steered the conversation away, not wanting to give my... *father* the time of day. My real one, at least.

Sure, the thought of him alone messed with me, but I had to admit, the fact that I'd only found out *recently* that he was my father didn't feel too good either. I suppose that out of shame, Mistpelt hadn't wanted to tell me who my father was, and she'd only told me just a few moons ago that Scourge was my father. While I'd found it in me to forgive her, the thought of that whole situation still made me feel a bit off.

So, I was more than glad to move the conversation along to something else. "So, I haven't even asked this yet, I can't believe it. But..." I then nodded from Smudge and then to Firestar. "How did you and Firestar meet?"

Firestar let out a low, warm purr of laughter and flicked his tail toward Smudge.

"Ah, we just grew up together," he said, his voice tinged with nostalgia. His green eyes softened, their sharpness momentarily dulled by the haze of memories.

Smudge tilted his head, his whiskers twitching with amusement. "Grew *up* together? That's putting it lightly! You were practically glued to my side, Rusty—or, uh, Firestar now, I suppose." he chuckled.

Firestar's whiskers twitched with amusement as he raised an eyebrow. "Don't act like you weren't the one constantly dragging me to chase butterflies or climb Twoleg fences. I lost count of how

many times I nearly got stuck!"

Smudge let out a playful huff, puffing out his chest. "Well, someone had to teach you how to have fun before you went off chasing fox tails and playing hero in the forest. You were all seriousness back then—no sense of humor whatsoever!"

I let out a soft purr of laughter, unable to help myself. Watching the two of them was like watching kits tussling in the nursery. It was hard to imagine Firestar, the dignified leader of ThunderClan, scampering around Twolegplace like a mischievous apprentice.

Smudge gave Firestar a teasing nudge with his paw. "Though, I'll admit, I couldn't believe it when you said you were leaving. After everything—our games, our talks, the safety of Twoleg nests—you just up and decided to go chasing some wild dream in the woods."

Firestar's expression grew wistful as he glanced down at his paws. "It wasn't an easy decision, Smudge," he murmured, his voice quieter now. "Leaving everything behind... leaving you behind... it was tough. But I know I made the right choice—ThunderClan is my home. But that doesn't mean I didn't miss you."

The sincerity in his tone made my chest tighten a little. Firestar's loyalty to his Clan was unwavering, but it was clear how much his friendship with Smudge had meant to him—and still did.

Smudge blinked slowly, his teasing demeanor giving way to something softer. "Well, I missed you too, you know," he admitted. "It was weird, not having you around. The Twolegplace felt a lot more lonely without you."

The two toms shared a look, one that spoke volumes of a bond that time and distance hadn't managed to break.

I found myself trying to hold back a purr as I watched them. There was something heartwarming about the way they interacted. *So, so sweet...*

And before Firestar could respond to Smudge's kind words, all of us seemed to flinch as we all simultaneously seemed to hear gasps and

yowls of surprise coming from outside the den.

All three of us froze, ears pricked and eyes wide. Firestar's expression shifted in an instant, all traces of nostalgia vanishing as he sprang to his paws.

"Uh, oh," he breathed, almost too quiet for me to hear. "Let's see what this is about."

Smudge and I exchanged a brief, alarmed glance before rushing after him.

We spilled into the clearing, where the peaceful quiet of the camp had been replaced by chaos. Cats emerged from dens, their fur bristling with tension, while others stood frozen, their gazes locked on the camp entrance.

It wasn't hard to see what had caused the commotion.

Squirrelflight was right in the center of camp, Brambleclaw, Brightheart, and Cloudtail right next to her as they tried to answer the questions of all the other cats surrounding her.

My heart thudded as I took in the sight of her carrying something in her mouth. At first, I couldn't make out what it was—just a small, limp bundle of fur. But as she drew closer, I caught the faint, high-pitched mewling. *No way!*

A kit!

Chapter 3

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

Hearing the constant complaining mews of Swiftkit all the time, I didn't think much of it when a weak whimper of a kit floated in from the entrance of the nursery. It was faint, almost swallowed up by the rustle of leaves and the several voices I could also hear from outside the den.

I stayed curled in my nest, lazily flicking my tail. Swiftkit was sprawled out beside me, gnawing on a piece of moss he'd been convinced was his mortal enemy. His dramatic grunts as he wrestled the poor thing made a purr rise in my throat. For once, it wasn't me getting pounced on as part of his antics.

Don't get me wrong – I did love every single one of the antics. And the fact that Swiftkit was even here with me still felt like a weird dream – a good one, though.

Swiftkit, my son, had been born just a few moons ago at this point. A pang of mixed emotions rippled through me as I glanced down at his tiny, eager form. I wasn't proud to admit it, but his father was Breezepelt of WindClan. It's not like I'd planned for things to end up this way. I gave birth to Swiftkit not long after a Gathering, with Breezepelt by my side. But Firestar had urged us to end things, and well, when Firestar speaks, you listen.

And when you get stupid, you try to bring yourself back down to earth, I suppose.

Only Firestar, my parents, and I knew the truth about Swiftkit's real father. Everyone else in ThunderClan believed Mousewhisker was his father, because Mousewhisker, truly the kindest tom in existence in my eyes right now, had stepped up without hesitation, and for that, I'd always be grateful. Still, the lie sat heavy in my chest sometimes.

However, whenever I'd look at Swiftkit though, all of those stresses seemed to go away. And this morning already seemed to be off to a great start as I purred and watched him play with his moss.

It wasn't until Daisy, who had been grooming herself across the den, suddenly sat bolt upright and practically leapt out of the nursery that I stirred. Her abrupt movement caught my attention, and my ears pricked up. *What the heck was that all about?*

In very me-fashion, curiosity immediately took over my entire being, and I quickly wanted to know what was going on. "Come on, Swiftkit," I meowed gently to my soon, nudging him with my nose. "Let's go see what all the fuss is about."

He dropped the battered moss ball and looked up at me, gray-blue eyes gleaming with curiosity. "Did someone bring fresh-kill?"

"Probably not, but hey, let's go find out," I replied, sweeping him along with my tail as I padded out of the nursery.

When we stepped outside, I immediately noticed the crowd gathered in the center of camp. Cats were clustered together, murmuring and shuffling, their tails flicking with curiosity. The two young kittypet newcomers – Pippy and Dusty - were standing off to the side, their wide eyes darting nervously between the mob and each other. Smudge, Lilypetal, and Firestar appeared to have just emerged from Firestar's den up on the Highledge.

At the heart of the group, I caught a glimpse of Squirrelflight's dark ginger fur. Whatever was going on, it had the whole Clan's attention.

I nosed Swiftkit to stay close as I weaved through the throng. "Stick with me, you little furball. Don't go wandering off."

"I'm not wandering! I'm investigating," he shot back back up at me.

I rolled my eyes and let out a sigh. "And that is exactly what your mother would use as an excuse too." I muttered under my breath.

As we edged closer, the weak meows grew louder, but it wasn't Swiftkit's voice, I now knew that for sure. My heart quickened with

curiosity. Finally, I managed to gently nudge my way to the front to see that Squirrelflight was crouched in the center of the crowd, her green eyes soft with concern as she leaned over a small, trembling form.

"Whoa!" I breathed as my eyes fell on the small white kit that was at the she-cat's paws.

I blinked down at the tiny creature. Its dusty white and gray fur was tangled with bits of twigs and leaves, and its pitiful mews tugged at something deep in my chest. It looked so small, so fragile, rolling back and forth on the ground as if unsure what to do with itself.

I glanced up at Squirrelflight, then at Brambleclaw, and back at her again.

"Well, that was fast!" I exclaimed.

Squirrelflight's head snapped up, her expression a mix of exasperation and disbelief. "It isn't mine, mouse-brain!" she snapped. "I just found this little furball in the forest, in a bush!"

I shrugged, ignoring her sharp tone. "Alright, alright, keep your fur on." My gaze returned to the kit. It looked about a moon old, its soft fur fluffed up against the chill. Healthy enough, from what I could tell. But then it turned its face towards me, and my breath caught in my throat.

The face shape, the eyes... not even the eye color, but something about the *shapei*—something about this kit was so familiar that it sent a shiver down my spine. My claws sank into the earth as I stared, frozen in place. My mind scrambled to place the memory, the connection, but it was darn difficult...

I backed away from the crowd, my fur bristling as used my tail to make sure that Swiftkit was still next to me. As I turned, I caught sight of Lilypetal, my mother, who was now down on the camp floor and watching me with a curious, almost wary expression. She tilted her head, her eyes narrowing as though she were trying to read my thoughts.

"Do you see it too?" she asked quietly, her voice low enough that only I could hear.

I blinked at her. "What do you mean?"

Lilypetal stepped closer, her gaze flickering between me and the kit. "You saw the kit, didn't you? Who do you think it looks like?"

Before I could answer, Firestar's yowl rang out from the Highledge.

"What is going on here?" he demanded, his authoritative voice silencing the murmurs instantly. All heads turned towards him, including mine.

Squirrelflight stepped forward, picking up the kit gently in her jaws and holding it up for Firestar to see. His green eyes widened as the tiny bundle came into view.

Cloudtail spoke first. "We found her in the forest."

"The poor thing was in a bush, mewling away," Brightheart added.

Firestar frowned, his tail flicking thoughtfully. "What should we do?" Brambleclaw asked, his gaze fixed on the kit.

After a long pause, Firestar finally nodded. "What we always do when we find a kit that is alone and in trouble. We take her in."

I immediately nodded in agreement, and out of the corner of my eye, surprisingly, no one protested, doing the same as I had. *No warrior may neglect a kit in pain or in danger, even if that kit is from a different Clan.*

I then flicked my ears as I took another good look at the small little scrap. *Although, I don't think this poor thing is from another Clan... maybe some rogues abandoned her?*

I then pulled myself out of my thoughts as I watched Firestar's gaze sweep over the gathered cats. "She still looks fairly young – like she still needs milk from a queen..." His green eyes then fell on Poppyfrost, who already was eagerly looking up at the ThunderClan leader with her bright blue eyes. "Poppyfrost – you have had kits

the most recently, and this kit looks about the same age as Cherrykit and Molekit. Are you able to manage a third kit to take care of?"

Poppyfrost immediately gave an eager nod. "Firestar, absolutely. I would gladly take her in," the tortoiseshell replied from where she was now standing near the nursery with Cherrykit and Molekit at her paws.

Firestar nodded approvingly. "Thank you, Poppyfrost. Then she's yours."

Squirrelflight, now looking significantly more relieved, carried the kit over to Poppyfrost and gently placed her down. The kit's wide eyes darted around nervously, and she shrank back, her fluffy tail curling tightly around her small frame.

Suddenly, to my surprise, Swiftkit left my side and bounded forward, his usual boldness on full display. He stopped in front of the shy little kit and simply stood there for a moment before giving her a single nod. Then, spotting another clump of moss on the ground, he nudged it towards her with his paw.

The kit hesitated for a moment, staring up at my son in surprise before pawing it back. Soon, the two of them were engrossed in a game of mossball, Cherrykit and Molekit eagerly joining in after watching them in awe. And soon enough, purrs and squeals of delight filled the air, breaking the tension that had hung over the camp like a storm cloud.

I padded up to Poppyfrost, a purr rising in my throat as I watched the four kits, and then gave my fellow mother a light nudge. "Well, it seems like she'll fit in just fine."

Poppyfrost nodded, her gaze soft as she watched the kits play. "Thank StarClan," she breathed. She then gave me a nod as her blue eyes glowed. "And thank StarClan for your son for taking the initiative to make her comfortable."

That's my son, I thought to myself as pride seemed to swell in my heart. *I'm so proud.*

Before I could respond to Poppyfrost out loud, heavy pawsteps thundered behind me. I turned to see Jayfeather practically *charging* towards me, his expression twisted with urgency.

"I need to talk to you!" he hissed, his voice low but intense.

I blinked at him, startled by his abruptness. "Uh, okay?" I replied, following him as he spun around and stalked towards the medicine den. *What the heck?*

Once inside the medicine den, I watched as Jayfeather began pacing, muttering to himself. His tail lashed back and forth like an angry snake.

"What is your problem?" I asked, more concerned than curious.

He stopped abruptly and whirled to face me. "That kit!" he exclaimed, his blind blue eyes blazing, staring at me as if he could see.

"What about it?" I questioned, tilting my head.

Jayfeather stalked closer, his fur bristling. "You mouse-brain! Don't you see it?"

"See what?" I shot back, starting to feel a little defensive, and I have to admit, frustrated at myself that I couldn't see what the medicine cat was getting at.

"The light, long fur. The blue eyes..."

"How do you know what it looks like?" I asked, tilting my head, eyeing him with a mixture of skepticism and genuine intrigue.

Jayfeather froze in mid-step, his head jerking toward me, his blind blue eyes narrowing in irritation. "All it takes is asking for a description, Goldenshine!" he snapped, his voice tight with frustration.

"Why would you need it though?" I asked him cautiously, aware of the growing frustration in his voice. "You usually don't care for kits much."

Jayfeather's shoulders sagged, and he stopped pacing again, clearly struggling to put his thoughts into words. His tail lashed in agitation before he took a deep breath, the sound filling the tense silence between us. "Because, as soon as I got close to that kit, I felt something."

I flicked my ears and took a few steps back. "Whoa, Jayfeather, age difference!"

Jayfeather's breath hitched, and he let out a long, slow sigh, clearly irritated by my attempt to brush it off. He turned to face me again, his blind gaze piercing through me, clearly urging me to know that this was serious. So, I shut up. "I felt something so familiar from that kit. I don't even know how to describe it. It gave me such a feeling of warmth, yet it sent a chill down my spine." His words hung in the air, thick with mystery, and I couldn't help but feel a strange sensation twist in my gut, the hair on my back standing up once again.

Jayfeather paused, looking at me with a tiredness in his eyes that I hadn't seen before. His tail flicked nervously at his side. "My heart began beating so fast," he continued, voice barely above a whisper. "And as soon as I stood in front of that kit, it almost felt like there was this presence... and I almost felt something rub against my flank and lick my ear."

A deep knot formed in my stomach as I met his gaze. "Jayfeather, what are you saying?" I asked, my voice shaking slightly as I tried to piece it all together.

Jayfeather fell silent for a long moment before eventually letting out a sigh and slowly turning his gaze to face me. "Goldenshine, do you remember when Snowflight came to us in a dream, and she told us that she would be *back* soon?" he asked.

I nodded slowly, trying to remember the details of that dream—Snowflight's soft, sweet voice, the quiet farewell, the promise that she would return. "Yeah?" My voice trembled slightly, the implications of what Jayfeather was saying starting to crash down on me, my spine giving a shudder as I then was brought back to that horrible, horrible night.

Sure, it had ended fairly well, but gosh, was the night before truly the worst night of my life.

Snowflight had died at the hands of that horrible, traitorous Ashfur. Her death had shattered us all. I thought that there would never be a day where I would ever feel good again. *I mean, when you lose your sister that you were also incredibly close to, it does feel like the world is collapsing around you.*

But even amidst my grief, I had been shocked to see just how much her death had impacted Jayfeather. Just a little while before Snowflight I had died, I found out from Snowflight herself that Jayfeather seemed to have feelings for her. And I had to admit, losing her clearly demonstrated to me just how much Jayfeather cared for her.

And clearly, Snowflight cared so much for him too. Jayfeather was there with the rest of my family when she managed to pay us a visit in StarClan the night after she died. In that dream, she had given us a final goodbye, telling us she would be back soon.

None of us had understood it then, but now... now, everything was starting to fall into place.

Jayfeather watched me, his gaze unwavering, waiting for me to understand, before he finally snapped. "You idiot! Don't you see? That kit is a reincarnate of Snowflight!"

Chapter 4

[image]

Swiftkit's POV

I was so exhausted by the time the sun had begun to disappear behind the trees.

After her weird and random arrival, I had played with the new kit all day. She was fun and all, but she was so shy and nervous at times that it seemed like a butterfly could scare her. But, not shockingly, she seemed to like me, so I had spent a lot of time with her and we tossed a mossball around. It was actually quite fun, and I liked having a new friend, and one that seemed closer to my age than Cherrykit and Molekit.

But before we knew it, the camp had become dark and it was time to go to sleep. I was about to toss the mossball back to the kit when I heard Goldenshine's call from inside the nursery, and I saw her golden brown tabby tail flick from outside the nursery.

The white she-kit gave me a look that honestly made me feel a bit sad—her head lowered, and she didn't seem to want me to leave. *Aw...*

For a moment, I hesitated, the mossball still between my paws, but then I nodded at her and padded toward the nursery. She stayed where she was, small and alone in the center of the clearing, her tail curling tightly around her paws.

When I reached the nursery, I glanced back over my shoulder. *What the heck is she doing?*

The kit hadn't moved. She was sinking closer to the ground, her body trembling slightly. I think she was scared—she was one of the only cats left in the open clearing, and the shadows were growing deeper by the moment.

I watched her in panic and hesitated, my paws twitching with the urge to go back to her, but before I could decide, Poppyfrost practically ran past me and out of the nursery.

The older queen moved quickly, scooping up the kit as she let out a series of fearful meows. I watched as Poppyfrost carried her to a nest, murmuring softly until the kit quieted down. I then felt even better as I then watched the kit burrow into Poppyfrost's fur, her tiny shape finally relaxing.

I turned back to find Goldenshine also watching with me. For some reason, her gray eyes were soft but seemed dark. "Have you decided what you're going to name her, Poppyfrost?" she asked suddenly. I then looked back at Poppyfrost excitedly, also so curious to hear the answer to this question.

Poppyfrost lowered her head, brushing her tail over the kit's back. "Actually, I have," she whispered, her eyes warming as she looked down at the little white kit. "I wanted to consult you about a certain name before I settled on it."

Goldenshine tilted her head, her ears angling forward as she waited for Poppyfrost to continue.

Poppyfrost met her gaze, her expression thoughtful but warm. "I wanted to name her Snowkit, in honor of your sister."

Beside me, I felt Goldenshine stiffen as her tail brushed gainst my side. I tried to catch her expression, moving my neck to look up at her, but her face was unreadable.

For a moment, I thought she might say nothing at all, which would be *embarrassing*. But luckily after a few heartbeats, she relaxed her shoulders and nodded. "That would be wonderful, Poppyfrost. Great idea." Her voice was kind, but there was a faint tremor in it that made my ears flick back uncomfortably.

Poppyfrost dipped her head in gratitude before curling around Snowkit, who was already fast asleep. I watched as the older she-cat lowered her head to rest, her breathing slower and more relaxed.

Goldenshine turned to me, her expression softening as she leaned down to give me a lick on the head. She then wrapped her tail around me, drawing me close, and I nestled into her warmth as I purred.

But as I pressed against her side, a familiar ache appeared in my chest, just as it always did this time of day – when toms would pop into the nursery to wish the queens and kits goodnight.

Well, for most of the queens and kits.

Don't get me wrong, Goldenshine was a wonderful mother—I couldn't ask for better. She was so fun, and she always played with me, made me laugh, and took care of me the best that she could. But no matter how much love she gave me, it felt weird sometimes watching the other cats in the nursery – queens and kits that had a mate and father to come and see them or greet them.

In my situation though, I knew it was just me and Goldenshine.

I knew who my father was. Breezepelt. A WindClan warrior. Goldenshine had told me as soon as I could understand words.

"I didn't want you to grow up with lies," had been her exact words to me.

I didn't really know what she meant by that.

What I did know was that Breezepelt wasn't *here*. He wasn't going to raise me or teach me how to hunt or tell me stories about his life. And as far as ThunderClan was concerned, my father was Mousewhisker, a kind tom who had pretended to be Goldenshine's mate so that she wouldn't have to tell ThunderClan who my real father was.

It had been a good lie, a believable one, but it couldn't last forever. Eventually, they had ended the act, claiming they were better as friends.

And so I was left with no father. Just a name. *Breezepelt.* I didn't know if I wanted to meet him or not. As strange as it was not to have a father, it was all that I had known. *And that is fine.*

That specific thought on my mind, I then took a deep breath, trying to calm down my own thoughts as I drifted into sleep, the comforting warmth of Goldenshine's fur making sleep so easy.

But for some reason, the darkness didn't last, and I didn't wake up to the next day like I always did when I slept in my nest at night.

Instead, everything around me completely changed, and everything started to take shape. Shadows turned into trees, their branches reaching up like claws to scratch at the dark sky. The ground felt hard and crumbly under my paws, and the grass was all dry and scratchy. A cold shiver ran down my back, and I swore I could hear whispers floating through the air. They weren't loud enough to understand, but they were creepy enough to make my ears flatten. *What is happening?*

I turned in a slow circle, my claws sliding out without me even thinking about it. I wasn't scared—okay, maybe a little—but this place gave me the creeps. It felt... wrong. Like... it wasn't supposed to exist.

Is this StarClan? I thought as I continued to try and take in my surroundings. *If it is, StarClan isn't nearly as nice as the elders always made it sound.*

Suddenly, there was a loud *thud* behind me, and I spun around so fast my heart nearly jumped out of my chest. A little yelp slipped out of my mouth before I could stop it, and I immediately cringed. *Great. I sound like a scared kit.*

Trying to act tough, I puffed out my chest, ready to face whatever was approaching me.

The shadows were thick, but I could see glowing blue eyes staring at me through the darkness. Then a voice came—low and smooth, with this weird, almost teasing tone. *Who* is *that?*

"Hello, Swiftkit. I've been waiting for you."

A chill ran through me, and I took a step back, my claws digging into the dirt. "Who are you? How do you know my name?" My voice

came out shakier than I wanted, which made me scowl.

The tom chuckled softly, and it was the kind of purr that made your fur stand on end. "I've been watching you for a while."

Before I could say anything else, he stepped into the light, and my breath caught. "-and I think you have great potential."

I couldn't even process the compliment – all that I could do was drop my jaws. The cat was huge—like, *really* big and muscular—with gray fur that was speckled darker, and his blue eyes gleamed with something... weird. It wasn't just ambition; it felt meaner than that. *Scarier.*

"Who are you?" I then asked out loud, my voice as clear as I was probably going to get it.

The tom seemed surprised, and I was worried that for some reason I had offended him with the question. "I'm surprised you would ask that, Swiftkit," he then murmured menacingly. "The whole of ThunderClan quivers at the sound of my name!"

I had to take one more scan of the tom, a bit frustrated at the fact that I didn't immediately recognize him. *If everyone is so scared of him... why haven't I heard about him yet?*

But then it hit me, like a branch falling on my head.

My ears shot up, and before I could stop myself, I blurted, "You're Ashfur!"

He purred again as he watched me then take a step back, and it echoed like thunder through the clearing. "No need to be afraid," he said, taking a step closer.

Afraid? I can't help but be a little afraid!

Stories about him popped into my head, one after another, like flashes of lightning. Now I remembered - Goldenshine had told me about him—how he was obsessed with revenge against Lilypetal and ThunderClan, how he'd done horrible things, how he'd died. And how he'd killed her sister, Snowflight.

And how she'd killed him back.

I straightened up and lifted my chin, trying to push my fear down as far as it would go. "Why should I be scared?" I said, my voice steadier than I expected. "My mother *killed* you."

For a second, his smirk wobbled, but then he shook his head like it didn't bother him. "I see you have heard of me," he muttered, sounding annoyed.

I nodded, keeping my eyes locked on his. Despite how dangerous this tom clearly was, I was so curious as to why he had come to see me. "Where am I?" I asked, my voice cutting through the heavy silence as I turned my head, trying to take in my surroundings.

The shadows around me seemed to shift, twisting like they were alive. The air felt thick, almost too heavy to breathe. My paws dug into the cold, dry ground beneath me, and I couldn't shake the feeling that something about this place wasn't right. It was as if the forest itself was watching me.

Ashfur smirked, his blue eyes gleaming with something I couldn't quite name. "You're in the Dark Forest," he said, his tone smug, like he was announcing something grand. "Which is where you will probably get the best warrior training ever possible."

My ears pricked forward as my gaze snapped back to him. The strange, eerie forest faded into the background, and all of my focus locked on him.

"Dark Forest?" I repeated, narrowing my eyes. The name made a chill run down my spine. "Isn't that where the bad cats go when they die?"

"That's a way of putting it," he responded smoothly, as if he'd expected the question. "Or more like, where the cats go who actually have something to fight for, and who aren't lunatics and wimps."

His words hung in the air, sinking into my mind like stones dropping into a pond. I tilted my head, intrigued despite myself. I'd

always been told the Dark Forest was full of villains, the cats who had done terrible things and couldn't walk with StarClan. But Ashfur made it sound... different.

Better?

I nodded slowly, mesmerized by the way he spoke, the confidence in his voice. It was like he believed every word he said with all his heart, and I couldn't help but listen.

But his earlier words still tugged at me, lingering like a burr caught in my fur. "What did you say about 'getting the best training ever possible'?" I asked.

Ashfur's smirk widened. It was a cold, sharp kind of smirk, the kind that made me both scared and curious at the same time. "Right. I am here tonight to visit you because I want to offer you the amazing training that the Dark Forest can give you."

Training? Whoa!

I blinked, taken aback. "But I'm not even an apprentice yet!" I reminded him, frowning a little. "Why do you want to train me *now?*"

"The earlier you start training to be a warrior, the better," Ashfur replied, his voice smooth and convincing, and his blue eyes narrowed

I tilted my head, thinking hard about his words. *But I'm not even six moons yet, but... isn't this what every kit dreams of? Being strong? Being a warrior? Being the best?*

It was all I'd ever wanted. I thought about the stories my mother had told me when I was younger, about the cats who had fought bravely in battles, who had protected their Clans, who had earned their place among the strongest warriors in StarClan. I wanted to be one of those cats *so* badly.

And now, here was a strong cat, offering me the chance to start early—to get ahead. It felt too good to be true.

"I can train you to be the best warrior of all the Clans," Ashfur continued, his voice dropping to a low, persuasive murmur. "You'll have all of the cats shaking at your paws by the time I'm done."

I flicked my ears at that, my tail-tip twitching. The idea made my chest swell with pride, but at the same time, it felt... strange. *Cats shaking at my paws?* That was a lot to imagine, especially when I wasn't even old enough to *hunt* yet.

Still, I couldn't stop imagining it. The way he said it, it was like he believed I could do it—like he could see something in me that even *I* hadn't noticed before. Maybe he was right.

Maybe I could be more than anyone expected.

Ashfur's gaze stayed on me, sharp and determined, as if he could sense me thinking hard about his offer. "So, what do you say?" he asked, his voice cutting through my thoughts.

I met his bright blue eyes, my heartbeat quickening. For a moment, I hesitated, uncertainty gnawing at the edges of my mind. This was the Dark Forest, the place where bad cats went. But... was it really so bad? If I just trained there for a little while?

But even then, it was with *Ashfur.* He'd killed someone that was my *kin.* Cats like Goldenshine or Lilypetal would be so disappointed to see me doing this.

But at the same time... if Ashfur was offering something like this to me... was he really so bad? What if he was trying to make amends by training Goldenshine's and Lilypetal's kin?

Even if it wasn't anything like that... what could hurt about receiving some training? *And getting ahead!* I thought excitedly. *I don't think there's anything wrong with that... right?*

After taking a deep breath, I then gave a light nod to Ashfur.

Ashfur's smirk managed to stretch even wider, his satisfaction practically radiating off of him. "Wonderful," he then sneered. "I will see you tomorrow night, then?"

I nodded again, and before I could say another word, he began to fade into the shadows. The bushes swallowed him up, and then the trees, until the whole forest around me started to dissolve like mist under the sun. One moment, I was standing there, surrounded by darkness, and the next, my eyes opened again and I was back in the nursery.

The pale light of dawn was creeping through the entrance, soft and quiet. Everything was just as I'd left it. The other kits and queens were still asleep, curled up in their nests. It was like nothing had happened.

But something *had* happened.

I stared down at my paws, my thoughts a jumbled mess. What had I just agreed to? What had I just *done*?

I glanced up, catching sight of the moon through the cracks in the den roof. It was fading, slipping behind the trees as the first rays of sunlight pushed it away. The nursery felt too small, too quiet, like my thoughts were too big to fit in here anymore.

Looking back down, I shook my head slowly, a heavy feeling settling in my chest.

What are you doing?

Chapter 5

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

Even through just the slits of my eyelids, I could see that the sun was already bright and high in the sky.

Despite how bright things clearly were even just through my *eyelids,* I had the audacity to fully open my eyes and face the sunlight. Considering how close to blind I now was, I could tell that sunhigh was fast approaching.

After letting out the smallest stretch and yawned, I looked down to see that Swiftkit was still at my side, fast asleep, his breaths still slow and steady.

I couldn't help but let out a small grunt and narrow my eyes at this sight. *That's strange*, I said to myself, *usually he's bouncing off of the den walls at this time of day*.

I then slowly glanced back at the nursery entrance again, where the sun was still violently leaking through. *Is that part of the reason why I slept in too? Because he didn't wake up begging me for food or asking me to play like he usually does?*

I then looked back down at my son. *Strange.*

Though I was worried, I just tried to tell myself that he'd worn himself out playing with the new it yesterday, and just needed some extra sleep.

So, I decided to let him have that as I slowly and quietly stood up. But despite my cautiousness, Swiftkit's eyes still began to open in our nest. I then watched, actually feeling kind of relieved as his mouth gaped into a huge yawn.

I then let out a *mrrow* of laughter as he slowly began to rise from

his slumber, looking groggier than usual too.

I then sniffed as I gave him a little poke with my tail. "Great StarClan, you aren't going to be able to sleep at *all* this moonhigh if you slept as long as I think you did," I commented to him.

He turned to me, his eyes looking heavy with fatigue. "I didn't," he said groggily.

I tilted my head in confusion. *Wait, so he* didn't *sleep?*

And my heart was beginning to rush with panic as he let out another huge yawn. "I woke up just before dawn and couldn't fall back asleep for what felt like *moons*."

I let out a sigh of relief just at receiving an explanation, and I stroked Swiftkit;s small head with my tail and then licked his ears. "Well, *get* some sleep then, for StarClan's sake!" I told him. "Strong warriors need to be well rested if they want to grow up big and strong."

As it always did, I think the thought of a warrior got through to Swiftkit. His gray-blue eyes brightening for a moment, he then let out one last yawn and then lied his head back down in the nest. I stared worriedly down at my son's sleeping figure for a moment, gently stroking his head with my tail before shifting my gaze over to Poppyfrost and her kits, where they were playing.

My heart nearly stopped again as I looked at the white kit, now named Snowkit.

I remember my heart skipping a beat as Poppyfrost told me that this shy little she-cat would be sharing the same name as my sister. *Especially when...* I then thought. *When Jayfeather thinks that... Snowflight is* in *that little kit somewhere. Great StarClan, what if it's true?*

As Cherrykit, Molekit, and Snowkit were playing, my gaze then locked with Snowkit's. Snowkit paused where she was, and I froze as gray eyes met blue.

And as I practically dove into her gaze, I found myself overwhelmed

by a wave of longing and love that I could hardly contain. Her eyes, so round and bright, seemed to shimmer with an innocent warmth that pulled at something deep inside me. It was almost as if Snowflight herself were there, her presence encapsulating me and this den.

The thought sent a shiver through me, both comforting and bittersweet. How could it be possible that part of her soul lived on in this tiny kit?

But at the same time, I knew with a hollow ache that I would never see the real Snowflight again. Her voice, her scent, her white fur—those were gone forever. It was such a strange and painful feeling, like holding onto a shadow that was slipping through my paws. The kit before me was real, full of life and possibilities, and yet she was also a reminder of what I had lost.

I then was pulled out of this spiral of thoughts when Snowkit then shook her head quickly, and she continued to play with her new siblings.

I simply stared off in the same place for a moment, even though Snowkit's eyeballs weren't there anymore.

I was flabbergasted. Jayfeather was right – clearly something was going on here. The fact that Snowkit kind of *looked* like Snowflight wasn't enough to explain this.

After giving Swiftkit one last lick on the head, I practically bolted out of the nursery and traveled over to the medicine den to see how Jayfeather was doing, and maybe get more of his grasp on this entire Snowflight thing.

I entered the den to see that Jayfeather was organizing herbs - shocker. He acknowledged my presence by simply flicking his tail.

I waited a few heartbeats before he finally broke the silence. "What do you want?" he asked, his tone as sharp as a thorn.

I shrugged nonchalantly, keeping my tone light. "I just wanted to see how you were doing with the whole Snowkit deal?" I asked the

question casually, but my heart was still racing with the experience I'd just had.

But luckily, as I had expected, that question got his attention. His head snapped toward me so fast I thought he might give himself whiplash. "What do you mean, 'how am I doing?' I'm perfectly fine, and it's not bothering me anymore!"

I opened my mouth to press him further when the sound of high-pitched squeals cut through the den like a screeching jay. I turned just in time to see Poppyfrost padding in, Snowkit dangling from her mouth and wailing like she'd just lost her favorite moss ball. The little scrap's paw was held awkwardly, and a quick glance told me why—a thorn was stuck right in her pad. *Poor thing.*

"Snowkit was playing a little too hard. Poor thing got a thorn stuck in her paw," Poppyfrost explained, gently setting Snowkit down. She looked at Jayfeather with a pleading expression. "Jayfeather, think you can fix it?"

Jayfeather didn't even bother answering her. He just stalked over to Snowkit, pulled the thorn out in one swift motion—without so much as a warning—and then turned back to his herbs like nothing had happened.

Snowkit let out a heart-wrenching squeal that made my fur prickle, but Jayfeather didn't flinch. I watched him, my jaw practically hitting the floor. "She's done," he then muttered. "Now let me get back to my herbs, please."

"What about the bleeding?" I asked, my voice rising in disbelief. Before he could answer (or not answer), I snatched a clump of spiderweb without asking and began dabbing it on Snowkit's paw. Her cries softened with each touch until they finally faded altogether, and the bleeding stopped.

Jayfeather whipped around, grabbed the cobwebs out of my paw with a huff, and flicked his tail like he was shooing away a fly. "Okay, she's fine. Now, please leave my den. Thank you," he meowed, his tail still flicking in annoyance.

Poppyfrost stared at him for a few moments, her expression unreadable, before picking up Snowkit and leaving the den without another word.

As soon as they were gone, I couldn't resist quoting him back to himself. "'I'm perfectly fine, and it's not bothering me anymore!'"

"Shut up," he shot back immediately.

"What in the name of StarClan was that all about?" I pressed, still absolutely bewildered at the way the medicine cat had handled that situation.

He took a deep breath, as though he was gathering the strength to explain himself. "I can't just have her around me, Goldenshine," he confessed, his voice quieter now. "Knowing that Snowflight is in there... it's too much for me."

I blinked, caught off guard by the rawness in his tone. But I nodded slowly, trying to show that I understood. *After all, with what I had dealt with in the nursery just now... this was clearly going to be a lot for me too. But dang, Jayfeather...*

I glanced down at the ground and muttered bitterly, "Well, I'm sure Snowflight would appreciate it if you didn't yank a thorn out of her paw and then kick her out."

He didn't respond to that, just let out another sigh that seemed to carry the weight of all of StarClan.

You strange medicine cat, you.

Deciding he'd had enough of my company, I got to my paws and left the den without another word. I didn't think Jayfeather could handle much more of me today, and honestly, I wasn't sure I wanted to be in the middle of whatever storm was brewing in his head.

The first thing that caught my eye when I stepped out was Firestar speaking to Smudge and the two kittypet newcomers, Pippy and Dusty. Since Swiftkit was still fast asleep back in the nursery, I figured I had some time to kill. Stretching my legs, I padded

excitedly over to the group, my tail waving lazily behind me.

"Hey, if you all aren't busy right now, how would these two youngsters like to go out for a little hunt?" I asked, resting the tip of my tail on Pippy's shoulder with a warm gaze. The word "youngsters" rolled off my tongue with just enough teasing to make Dusty's ears twitch. Truth be told, they were probably both a bit older than me, but who was counting?

Firestar luckily looked quite pleased with my proposition, Smudge's eyes seemed to glow at the fact that his two friends were given something to do, and Pippy's eyes widened like she wasn't sure if I was serious. *Perfect.* This was going to be fun.

Both of the housecats looked at me with wide eyes, and then they turned to Smudge for approval, and he gave them a nod. "Go have fun," he meowed, gesturing them towards the camp entrance.

Pippy jumped up in the air and squealed while Dusty just immediately ran towards the camp entrance, eager to get started.

I purred as I saw how excited they were. They were already way ahead of me by the time I began to follow them into the forest.

By the time I had crawled through the camp entrance and into the forest, Pippy was already scanning her surroundings. "So, where do we go first?" she asked, almost seeming to be spinning in circles by how fast she was turning to look at everything.

"What are we going to catch?" asked Dusty.

I almost felt dizzy watching and listening to them. I couldn't believe that I was ever like that, but that's what Sorreltail always told me when I was an apprentice. *I suppose I'm like this now... but to keep it tame...er.*

I couldn't help but watch the two in admiration as they slowly began to explore the forest and sniff everything out, and I followed close behind. I actually found myself stepping back and not saying much for a bit – clearly they were concentrated and so excited to have this opportunity, so I let them enjoy it themselves for a bit.

And while I did so, I was actually able to observe their appearances for the first time since they'd arrived last night.

Pippy was a striking she-cat, her sleek black fur shimmering like rain on a raven's feathers. Her big, round green eyes glimmered with curiosity and a hint of mischief. She carried herself with a delicate grace, her movements fluid and precise like she was meant for something more than just kittypet life.

Dusty, on the other paw, had a rugged charm about him. His sandy-gray fur was an intricate mix of pale silver and a light, sandy brown. The pale blue of his eyes stood out sharply against his fur, giving him an almost icy, intense stare. And his build—StarClan *above!*—he was muscular in a way I didn't expect from a kittypet. Every stride of his rippled with strength, his broad shoulders and well-defined frame making me wonder just what kind of kittypet training routine he'd been on.

Still, the thought crossed my mind, *Do they even know how to hunt?*

I picked up my pace, trotting to catch up to the pair, and without a trace of subtlety, blurted out my thoughts and likely breaking their focus. "Do you all even know what you're doing?"

Dusty turned to face me with a grin as casual as his answer. "Nope!"

Then Pippy turned her head, her whiskers twitching with amusement. "Absolutely nothing!" she chirped, not missing a beat.

I rolled my eyes, still chuckling as I padded closer. "Well then, that's what I'm here for!" I announced dramatically, puffing out my chest for good measure. Then, with a flick of my tail, I bolted ahead, motioning for them to follow me deeper into the forest.

The trees stretched tall and wide around us, their bare branches creaking slightly in the growing breeze. The first drops of rain began to land on my fur, but I ignored it. Instead, I lifted my tail, signaling for silence, and lowered my nose to the ground. My ears swiveled as I focused on the rustle of leaves and the soft scurrying of tiny paws.

And as I did so, a fresh scent hit me—*mouse!* It sure was faint, but unmistakable, and I quickly located it through the undergrowth. The small creature was nibbling on a leaf, completely unaware of the predator watching from the shadows.

I crouched low, every muscle in my body tightening. Rain was starting to fall heavier now, making it harder to pick up scents, but this mouse had no idea I was there – and the sound of the rain made that all even easier.

I turned my head to glance at the kittypets, who were watching me with wide, expectant eyes. "As soon as you catch sight of your prey," I whispered, keeping my voice soft but firm, "bend down, and be as quiet as you can."

They nodded, their heads bobbing like eager apprentices hanging on their mentor's every word.

"Now watch closely," I murmured, still crouched low.

I moved forward with deliberate precision, making sure not to step on any twigs or dry leaves that might give me away. My movements were slow, measured, and patient. When I was close enough, I tensed my hind legs, calculating the perfect moment. Then, like a flash of golden brown lightning, I leaped forward.

The mouse didn't stand a chance. I landed directly in front of it and ended its life with a swift paw strike. Triumphantly, I scooped up my catch and turned back to Pippy and Dusty.

Their faces were priceless. Dusty's eyes were impossibly wide, and his jaw hung open in amazement. "That was amazing!" he exclaimed as I dropped the mouse at their paws.

I dipped my head in gratitude, flicking my tail toward the fresh-kill. "Taste it! This isn't a hunting patrol, so you can try it if you'd like."

They exchanged glances, their excitement evident, before diving in.

"That is fantastic!" Pippy purred through a mouthful of mouse, her voice muffled but delighted.

"Can we practice hunting?" Dusty asked eagerly as soon as they had finished, his eyes practically glowing with anticipation.

"Of course!" I meowed, stepping back to give them room.

Without hesitation, the two kittypets dropped low to the ground, mimicking the crouch they had just seen me use. Their forms were... well, rough, but the effort was there, and I couldn't help but feel a twinge of pride. They were trying, and clearly wanted to learn. *Hm...* I thought as I felt my eyes narrow. *They seem pretty enthusiastic about learning the ways of a warrior...*

As they practiced, I decided to strike up a bit of conversation. "So, have you all enjoyed being around the Clan cats?"

Pippy straightened up, her tail swishing happily. "It's been amazing!" she exclaimed, her green eyes sparkling with sincerity. "I don't think I ever want to leave!"

Dusty, still crouched in what I could only generously call a hunting stance, added, "You wild cats are so neat! You know so many things about the wild!"

He then more directly met my gaze, and I blinked in surprise as he stared back at me, his eyes glowing. "I wish I could learn from you every day!"

For some reason, his words made my ears grow hot, and I quickly turned my head to hide it. *Get it together, Goldenshine,* I scolded myself.

It was remarkable how much these two had changed in such. When I first saw them, they had been timid and unsure, their eyes darting around like they were ready to bolt at the first sign of trouble. Now, they were confident and eager, fully embracing life in the Clan. It was almost... *endearing.*

I watched them continue to sneak and pounce, their forms improving bit by bit. Pippy was mid-pounce, about to say something, when I heard loud screeches erupted from the direction of camp.

Oh, no.

My heart sank as a loud crash followed the cries, and I turned to the kittypets, my eyes wide with alarm. "Follow me!" I hissed, signaling for them to stay close.

Rain poured harder as we bolted through the forest, branches whipping against my fur. Thunder rumbled overhead, and the wind howled like a restless spirit. I didn't even look back to see if Pippy and Dusty were keeping up. I just had to hope - my focus was entirely on the dreadful noise coming from camp.

We burst through the camp entrance, skidding to a halt, and my breath caught in my throat.

A massive tree had fallen, its thick trunk crushing part of the camp. Beneath its gnarled branches, I spotted two motionless figures.

"Longtail and Brairpaw..." I breathed as I realized it out loud. "StarClan, help us."

Chapter 6

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

The most painful silence I think I would ever endure hung over ThunderClan's stone hollow. Even the roaring rain and thunder seemed like the quietest whisper. Completely insignificant.

I think that everyone in that stone hollow, including me, were all feeling the exact same thing – the most horrible mix of fear, dread, and uncertainty as we had all watched the thunderstorm strike one of the trees above the stone hollow, causing it to crash down on practically a third of the camp.

Right on top of it, and right on top of the elders den. We could all only imagine what had happened, yet surely all of us we terrified to find out.

However, from where I was, identifying who had been crushed under that tree was too horribly easy. Oh, no... I thought, my heart absolutely sinking and my jaw seemingly dropping to the stone ground. *Longtail and Briarpaw... No...*

Underneath the colossal trunk, the tabby elder and the young apprentice lay motionless. My stomach churned, and my mouth went dry. *No!*

At this sight, I found that my legs below me were beginning to tremble from how overwhelmed I was. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of Mousefur. The elder moved with a slow, heavy stride, her head low as she approached the growing crowd of cats cautiously emerging from their dens.

Her eyes were dark and distraught as she then seemed to watch the flame-colored pelt of Firestar emerge from his den on the Highledge. "What happened? Is everyone alright?" Firestar's voice cut through the tension like a blade as he burst through the gorse

tunnel, his flame-colored pelt ruffled with alarm.

Mousefur stopped short, her ears flattening as she lowered her gaze. After a long, painful pause, she shook her head. "They're gone, Firestar," she said, her voice breaking. "I'm sure of it. And it's my fault."

Firestar's expression remained unreadable, but his green eyes softened slightly. He jumped down from the Highledge and simply waited, giving her space to continue.

"I... I went after a mouse, and... I didn't notice the tree," Mousefur admitted, her voice trembling. "Longtail followed me, and Briarpaw followed him. And then... well..."

Mousefur trailed off for a moment, clearly trying to recollect herself as her shame seemed to overwhelm her. "None of this would have happened if it weren't for my stubbornness. I'm so sorry, Firestar."

Firestar stepped closer and rested the tip of his tail on her shoulder. "Mousefur, this isn't your fault," he murmured, his tone steady but quiet. "You couldn't help Longtail chasing after you, and you most certainly didn't cause that tree to fall down." As comforting as those words could have potentially been, considering how fresh the situation was, I could tell that they didn't make Mousefur feel much better at all.

But Firestar kept the top of his tail on the elder's shoulder as he then turned to the rest of the camp, raising his voice so all could hear, he turned to the rest of the Clan. "We need to lift this tree. What can we do?"

Brambleclaw stepped forward, his amber eyes flickering with determination. "We can prop it up with branches," he suggested. "If we're careful, we'll be able to pull both Briarpaw and Longtail out."

Of course, the camp sprang into action, and I immediately sprang forward to follow the deputy's command. Around me, cats scattered, yanking branches from the fallen tree or racing to find sturdy supports. My paws carried me to the nearest limb, and I sunk my teeth into the rough bark, dragging it toward the wreckage.

Around me, the air buzzed with urgency, but a gnawing dread settled in my chest. *Great StarClan, will this be enough? Please, please, please.*

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the makeshift supports were in place. The branches practically groaned under the weight of the tree, but they held. Lionblaze, his golden pelt glinting in the dappled light, crept cautiously into the narrow gap beneath the trunk.

My legs continued to tremble as I backed away, giving the younger tom some space. I then flinched as I found my fur brushing with someone else's, but I looked to my side and let out a sigh of relief when I immediately recognized the golden brown tabby pelt of Thornclaw. Our worried gazes met for a moment, but I managed to feel the smallest bit of comfort when he wrapped his tail around my back, pulled me closer, and touched his nose to my ear.

And then, we waited.

The camp held its collective breath as Lionblaze disappeared into the shadows of the branches. Time dragged, each heartbeat pounding in my ears.

And after what felt like *another* eternity, his mournful yowl shattered the silence.

"Longtail is dead."

No...

Gasps rippled through the gathered cats. Heads bowed, tails drooped, and the weight of grief settled over us like a heavy fog. Mousefur stood frozen, her gaze locked on the ground as she shook her head slowly, over and over.

"Briarpaw!" Millie's voice rang out as she and Graystripe pushed through the crowd. Her blue eyes were wide with panic. "What about Briarpaw?"

Lionblaze didn't answer. He emerged from the wreckage moments later, carrying Briarpaw's limp form by the scruff. Blood matted her

fur, but her sides rose and fell faintly. Without a word, Lionblaze signaled to Jayfeather with his tail.

Jayfeather was already moving, his blind eyes fixed with unerring precision on Briarpaw. Millie and Graystripe trailed after him as he pressed his nose to her flank, his whiskers quivering in concentration. After a tense moment, he straightened. "She's alive," he announced, "but I need to treat her immediately."

Relief and worry flickered across Millie's face as she followed Jayfeather to the medicine den. Leafpool hesitated briefly before trailing after them. I tilted my head, the smallest and faintest of smirks tugging at my mouth despite the heaviness in the air. Thornclaw and I even exchanged a shocked glance.

Because, to be honest, it was rare to see Jayfeather and Leafpool interact civilly, let alone *cooperate*. Maybe, just maybe, there was hope for them to mend their fractured bond.

My moment of surprise was cut short by Thornclaw letting out a sigh beside me and touching his nose to my cheek before padding toward Longtail's still body, which was now lying in the center of camp.

As I saw his completely devastated gaze and his eyes screwed shut as he pressed his nose into the elder's fur, I couldn't stand to see him alone with his grief. Swallowing hard, I followed, lowering my head to touch Longtail's pelt briefly. I hadn't known him well, but he had been a cat in this Clan that had made me feel so welcomed when I first came here, and had always been so incredibly kind to me. And while I fought back emotion and grief, I sent a silent prayer to StarClan for his journey.

And as the storm seemed to calm, being replaced by a light rain, trickled over the stone hollow as the entirely of ThunderClan seemed to be surrounding Longtail – an elder who I knew had grown *so* much after his time as a young warrior. A tom who had initially been so close-minded, unwelcoming, and one of Tigerstar's closest allies, had become one of ThunderClan's most beloved cats that I think would ever be known. *Even if I didn't speak to him all of the time, just knowing that he's not over in the elders den affects me*

enough...

As night fell, I could feel that everyone around me was just as reluctant to step away from the vigil as I was, but at Firestar's urging, everyone eventually backed away, forcing themselves to return to their dens and get some rest.

Fighting my grief and my guilt, I let out a long sigh and turned to head for the warriors den to take my rest. I had to admit, I was tired. A lot had happened in such a short time, and I was emotionally exhausted.

I crawled through the entrance and padded over to the nest that Thornclaw and I shared. As soon as I was standing over it, I found that I couldn't lie down immediately. I simply stood there for a moment, staring down at the moss and my paws. *So... so many losses in this Clan lately...* I thought to myself. *While losing Snowflight will never, ever, feel much better, I hate feeling this new sense of loss so soon after that.*

After a deep breath, I then finally forced myself to lie down in my nest. And sure, the nest was as comfortable as it had ever been, but my eyes would not close. My head was exhausted, sure, but also as full and spiraling as it ever had been. *Great. I'm going to be sad* and *tired tomorrow.*

Accepting this, I decided just to lie comfortably in my nest and try to cope with simply being alone with my thoughts. I also just tried to focus on the sounds of all of the stirring as the rest of the ThunderClan warriors slowly began to make their way into the den.

One of the last cats to make an appearance was Thornclaw, who had told me earlier that he was going to stay just a bit longer when I decided to head on over to the warriors den.

When he padded up to me and our nest, I opened my eyes slightly and was surprised to see that he didn't settle down beside me. Instead, he just stopped in front of me and gently tapped my shoulder with the tip of his tail.

With that, I fully opened my eyes and looked up at my mate,

meeting his downcast pale blue eyes that glowed in the darkness. "Is everything okay?" I whispered up to him as I sat up quietly and brushed my tail along his shoulder.

Thornclaw let out a huff, closing his pale blue eyes for a moment. "I'm not tired at all," he admitted to me before opening his eyes again, revealing a more hopeful gaze. "Do you want to go for a walk?"

I nodded, my gaze softening as I met his pale blue eyes. "I'd be more than glad to, Thornclaw."

Then, for a moment, as I fully got up onto my paws, we just stood there, sharing the warmest of glances. And after a moment, I flicked my head towards the den entrance and gave an encouraging flick of my tail. "Well, come on!" I then whispered as I began to lead my mate out of the den. "Let's go."

We padded side by side out of the warriors' den, the soft chirping of crickets filling the night air. The thunderstorm from earlier had passed, leaving behind a stillness that was almost eerie. It was unsettling how something so chaotic could come and go as if it didn't care what—or who—it affected. Which, I guess, it *didn't*.

Our paws slowed as we neared the clearing, and my heart nearly clenched at the sight ahead. Mousefur, Purdy, and Firestar stood solemnly around Longtail's body, their movements careful and deliberate as they seemed to be preparing him for burial.

I swallowed hard, the reality of it all still refusing to settle. Longtail. *Gone.*

I looked back at Thornclaw to see his gaze still set on the sight ahead, his shoulders heavy with grief. Without thinking, I reached out and brushed my tail gently along his cheek. He then shifted his gaze to me, his eyes dark but glinting with gratitude. And after a long, lingering look back at Longtail, he finally tore his gaze away and led me out of camp.

The forest wrapped around us, the trees towering silently under Silverpelt's glow. And honestly, we hadn't gone far when

Thornclaw's steps faltered. He let out a shaky sigh and sank to his haunches, his head bowing low.

My goodness, I could hardly stand to see him like this. Without a second thought, I settled beside him and wrapped my tail around his back. "Are you alright?" I asked softly.

Thornclaw blinked and stared ahead. "Great StarClan, I don't know why this is getting to me so much."

"Thornclaw, it's completely understandable," I reassured him, my tone firm yet kind. "Briarpaw was—no, *is*—your apprentice. 'Is,' because she's going to be *fine*." I gave a small shrug, shaking my head slowly. "And Longtail... I mean, he's been around as long as you've been *alive*. Of course, it's going to affect you like this."

Thornclaw let out a long sigh, nodding faintly. "Yes, that is true. You're exactly right."

He then let out a sigh. "He's just... always been there. And for him to die in such a brutal way... it's a lot. And Briarpaw..." He closed his eyes and exhaled sharply, his whiskers twitching as if just now recalling the apprentice's injuries. "You're right - she's going to be fine, but I can't even imagine how scared she felt—how dejected she probably feels now."

I couldn't help but agree, a shaky sigh escaping me. "My goodness, the poor thing." But I shook myself and looked back at Thornclaw, determination in my gaze. "But seriously, Thornclaw—Briarpaw is one of the most optimistic little apprentices I've seen. This surely won't bring her down."

He closed his eyes again, nodding more firmly this time. "I agree. Completely." When he looked at me, his eyes glowed with gratitude. "Thank you, Lilypetal," he murmured, his voice lighter now. Then, to my surprise, he let out a snort. "Gosh, sometimes I think you aren't real. You always seem to have the right thing to say."

I purred softly, leaning over to give him a quick lick on the head. "Awww. I certainly try..." I paused, tilting my head with a playful glint in my eyes. "And I'd like to think I am real."

Thornclaw then let out a sniff. "Thank StarClan," he replied with a purr of his own, brushing his muzzle against mine. His voice softened. "But seriously, thank you."

I gazed into his eyes as he pulled back, my voice steady with affection. "Of course, my love. I'm always, *always* here for you."

I then let out another purr as Thornclaw sighed, pulling me closer to him with his tail and nuzzling his muzzle into my cheek. I closed my eyes, just taking the moment to enjoy the closeness and take in my mate's warm, perfect scent.

But after a few moments, Thornclaw pulled away, his eyes bright and full of love and gratitude as he then nodded ahead. "How about we walk down to the lake? I'm sure it'll look nice with the moon being close to full."

With no hesitation, I nodded eagerly in reply. "Aw, I'm sure it'll be absolutely beautiful," I purred as I then twinned my tail with the tom's. "Let's do it."

The two of us then walked in silence as we headed towards the lake. Not any sort of awkward silence – gosh, that didn't exist with the two of us. Truthfully, just being in the company of the other was lovely enough, especially after a crazy day like today.

It was a beautiful night as well – fireflies were spread throughout the forest, and the sky above was now clear, flitted with the stars of Silverpelt.

I tried to take in absolutely everything. *Goodness, it really is true that the strongest storms bring the most beautiful skies after.*

My jaw then nearly dropped when Thornclaw and I padded past the last of the trees, arriving at the lake. Thornclaw had been right – the moon above was practically making the lake glow with its reflection. That, along with Silverpelt above basically made it look like a pool of stars. It was *gorgeous.*

And to be honest, I felt as wonderful as I could feel after the events of today, settling down in front of the lake next to Thornclaw. He

immediately let out what sounded like a contented sigh as he also sat down, wrapping his tail around me and pulling me closer. And after the two of us simply stared out at the lake for a moment, Thornclaw let out a smaller sigh as he shifted his gaze to look at me. I returned it to find a warm, glowing gaze full of love that made my stomach twist in the most wonderful way.

"Gosh, Lilypetal, I've missed this," he meowed to me softly.

My chest swelled, knowing exactly what he meant by saying this. "Oh, Thornclaw," I purred, my voice just as tender, "I have too."

He let out a huff and pressed his muzzle to my ear, his breath warm against my fur. "Imagine all of the nice nights we could have had like this if I hadn't been so stupid," he murmured.

I sighed, almost *hating* to look back on the time that the two of us had argued – I mean, had been in a *fight* that could almost be considered long-term. It hadn't even been that long ago, which was the worst part. "Oh, Thornclaw, don't be so hard on yourself," I replied, trying to keep my voice light as I replied to him.

He pulled back slightly, giving me a skeptical look, his ears angling forward as though he didn't quite believe me. I gave a small shrug, my whiskers twitching with amusement. "I mean, sure, you could have been less stupid," I added with a teasing edge.

He sniffed in agreement, his tail tip twitching. "Agreed."

"But we talked through it," I continued to reassure my mate. "You admitted you lashed out, and I admitted I reacted a bit harshly."

I then flicked an ear, muttering under my breath, "Though pretty justified..." Straightening up again, I let my gaze grow more serious as I looked into his eyes. "And you said you'd be careful..."

I then turned to fully face Thornclaw, making sure I was meeting his gaze. "Which you are, right?"

Thornclaw nodded, his gaze sincere and unwavering. "I promise you that I am, Lilypetal," he meowed firmly.

I closed my eyes and let out a long sigh, the tension in my chest finally easing. "Good," I murmured, sighing and leaning my head against his broad shoulder. "Thinking about you going to the Dark Forest all the time drives me insane."

He chuckled softly, his laugh rumbling deep in his chest. "That makes two of us," he said, tightening his tail's grip around mine. "I'm treading as carefully as I can."

"Thank StarClan," I meowed. I then touched my nose to Thornclaw's, taking in his scent once again before taking a deep breath and simply staring out at the lake once again and enjoying the moment.

Goodness, it really did hurt me to think about how much I had missed this – being by Thornclaw's side like this. But all that mattered was that we had reconciled, and honestly, our bond felt as strong as ever.

I mean, listen, it's not like I would ever *ask* for a fight, but it definitely had made our relationship and love seem unbreakable now. *Thank StarClan.*

After a few moments, I then noticed Thornclaw shift his gaze to look at me. My stomach beginning to fill up with butterflies, I looked back at him to find that his eyes were sparkling just as much as the lake seemed to be.

"What?" I asked, trying my best to hold back the purr rising in my throat.

He shook his head slightly, his eyes still glowing with affection. "Nothing, Lilypetal," he replied softly.

"What?" I asked again, my voice full of laughter.

"Nothing," he said again, a teasing purr rising in his throat. "You're just pretty, that's all."

I rolled my eyes, but I couldn't stop the bashfulness from showing on my face. "Oh my goodness gracious, Thornclaw," I meowed, my voice tinged with exasperated affection. "Thank you," I added

sincerely, giving his tail a gentle squeeze with mine.

"Of course. It's true," Thornclaw meowed.

"Aww, you're so sweet," I purred softly before looking shyly down at my paws for a moment. "And you're not too bad-looking yourself."

Thornclaw nudged his muzzle against my head, letting out a playful purr. "Aw, shucks. Thank you."

I smirked, rolling my eyes a little. "Of course. I mean, those blue eyes would make any cat's ears get hot..."

I paused, a thought nagging at me. "You know, mates always say things like 'I've loved you since the moment I laid eyes on you,' and other gross stuff like that, and... I don't know how I feel about that, because I'm not sure if I did."

Thornclaw flicked his ears in surprise, his eyes widening a bit. "Excuse me?"

"Hey, cut me some slack!" I meowed defensively, though my tone was light. "Yes, I've always thought you were handsome, of course, but that's not enough for me. I literally had no idea who you were, and you were mean to me."

Thornclaw sniffed and gave a dramatic roll of his eyes. "Touche."

I raised an eyebrow. "But, I mean, the cliched saying isn't completely malarkey. It certainly didn't take me long to fall for you after that."

"Oh yeah?" He leaned in a bit, his voice lowering with curiosity. "How long are we talking here?"

I looked up at my mate, my eyes narrowed and full of mischief. "Hm... until you realized I wasn't going to be some prissy, dainty furball spreading kittypet stink all over your camp, and you decided to be nice," I said with a smirk.

He purred with amusement, the rumble vibrating through his chest. "And that is completely fair," Thornclaw then began to shake his

head as he seemed to recall our first days knowing each other. "I have to admit, as soon as Firestar said that a new kittypet had arrived, I was determined to think that you were a prissy... what did you say?"

"Prissy, dainty furball spreading kittypet stink all over your camp," I reminded him with a playful flick of my tail.

"Right!" he purred, giving me an appreciative glance. "That's good."

"Thank you!" I responded with a wink.

"But who was I kidding?" Thornclaw's expression softened, his gaze full of warmth. "As soon as I met you, I knew you weren't like that. You honestly just seemed too good to be true, and I didn't want to give in too quickly." He sighed, his voice growing more sincere. "But gosh, Lils, did you make it hard to not like you."

"Aww," I then purred, stroking my mate's cheek with my tail. "You made it hard for me to stay mad at you after you initially gagged at me."

Thornclaw narrowed his eyes playfully. "I can't tell if you're being sarcastic."

"I'm not! I promise," I replied, shaking my head with a soft chuckle. Then I sighed, leaning into him. "I'm so, so glad I didn't stay mad at you."

"Me too."

We both fell into a comfortable silence, getting lost in each other's gazes, before I broke the moment with a sniff.

"Geez, if Goldenshine was here right now, I think she'd be vomiting up her entire day's worth of meals with all this sappiness," I observed, my voice full of laughter.

Thornclaw chuckled softly. "Hm, anyone would." I purred with amusement at the shared understanding. "But I don't care."

"Really?" I pressed to Thornclaw.

"Nope," he replied softly, his tail wrapping tighter around mine. "I love you."

I didn't hesitate to respond, my heart swelling at his words. "I love you too, Thornclaw."

Thornclaw purred in contentment, and I leaned my head against his chest. He put his muzzle up to my ear, his voice soft and intimate as he whispered, "I love you more than you'll ever know."

Chapter 7

[image]

Swiftkit's POV

Today was awful. So awful that for a moment, I almost thought it was all just some horrible nightmare.

Longtail was gone. *Gone.* Just like that. I wanted to curl up and whimper, but I didn't want to look like the weakest kit in the nursery, so I tried to stay as still and look as brave as I could, even though my still seemed to pound loudly in my chest and then sink every time that I thought about it.

Earlier that morning, Longtail had promised to tell me all about Tigerstar and the terrible things he'd done. He'd said he'd share absolutely all with me the next sunrise. But now... I'd never hear it.

The sun was already sinking behind the trees, and a long time had passed since the tree had fallen, and I was sitting by the nursery entrance, just staring at the vigil for Longtail. My head was low, my tail flicking back and forth nervously.

At some point, I could've sworn I heard Goldenshine call my name, but I didn't move. I didn't *want* to leave.

But just a few moments after I heard what I thought was my mother's call, I felt a familiar, warm tail wrap around me, and a soft, gentle lick on the top of my head.

"Swiftkit, it's time to come inside," Goldenshine whispered.

I looked up at her, my eyes full of sadness and longing. She gave me another lick, this time on my ear, and I could feel the comfort in her touch. "Longtail may walk with StarClan now, but he'll always be with you, Swiftkit."

She glanced up at Silverpelt, the stars twinkling in the sky, and for

a heartbeat, I thought I could see Longtail up there, watching over us. At least, I hoped that he was.

I nodded, feeling a lump in my throat, and got up to follow her inside the nursery. The soft warmth of the den was inviting, but my mind still clung to the grief, and it felt so weird leaving Longtail behind.

As we walked past the queens and their kits, I couldn't help but notice Poppyfrost's new adopted kit. She was curled up against her flank, but she was trembling, even in her sleep. I stared at her for a moment. *Does that kit ever know how to calm down?*

I shook my head and turned my gaze to Goldenshine, who was already curling up in her nest. There was just enough space for me, so I padded over, yawned wide enough to nearly stretch my mouth to the stars, and settled down next to her. Her soft fur was so warm and soft, and before long, her tail wrapped around me like a cozy shield.

As my eyes slid shut, I thought I was finally starting to drift off.

But then... I didn't. Again.

My eyes snapped open, and the peaceful nursery was gone. Instead, I was back in that dark, mysterious hollow, the place where I'd first met Ashfur.

I leapt to my paws, my claws already sliding out as I scanned the surroundings. My ears flicked as I heard rustling from behind me, followed by the sound of something heavy crashing to the ground. And then, just like that, a massive shadow loomed over me.

Ah!

I let out a squeak—pure instinct—but then I forced myself to stop being a scared kit. I spun around and unsheathed my claws, ready to face whatever it was. But when I turned, I found myself staring at a sneering Ashfur.

"Heh, not bad. Not bad at all," he chuckled, giving me the most smug of looks. "For a kit."

I narrowed my eyes, hissing at him. "I may be a kit, but I could still shred your fur off if I wanted to!"

Ashfur purred with laughter, clearly amused. "Yeah, right. Not quite there yet, you little scrap," he teased, batting lightly at my head with one of his paws.

He looked at me with a strange glint in his eyes. "So, you ready to become the strongest warrior the Clans have ever seen?"

I didn't say anything. I just stared at him, wide-eyed. For a moment, I couldn't believe that I'd actually been brought back here. Since the first visit, there had been several times where I'd thought that it was all just a nightmare... or a dream?

But this proved to me that it had all actually happened. And I was... relieved? "I am ready!" I meowed to Ashfur. "I want to be the strongest warrior!

"Good," Ashfur murmured. He then smirked, leaning in closer. "Maybe even as strong as... Tigerstar?"

I could feel my jaw practically hit the ground as my eyes widened even more. Before I could even get my thoughts together, there was another rustling, and a large, dark tabby shape stepped out from the shadows. His pelt was scarred all over, his claws longer than any thorns I'd ever seen.

I couldn't believe it. My heart thudded in my chest. "You... you're..." I tried to speak, but my words felt like they were stuck in my throat.

The dark tabby padded up beside Ashfur, his presence so overpowering that I could feel the ground beneath me shake. He stood tall, his eyes cold and calculating. "Correct," he rasped in a voice so deep and menacing it sent a chill straight through my bones. "I'd be shocked if you hadn't heard of me."

I froze, unable to breathe, let alone speak. This was Tigerstar. *The* Tigerstar. The one everyone whispered about. The one whose name made the bravest cats tremble.

And now, here he was, standing in front of me.

I tried to shake off the wave of sadness that crashed over me when I looked at him – among everything else that I felt when I looked at him. I remembered again how Longtail had promised to tell me all about Tigerstar tomorrow morning, and how I would never get to hear that...

But I forced myself to shake that off. *Well, I guess this makes up for it,* I thought bitterly, trying to push the sting away.

"Tigerstar is going to be overseeing your training here in the Dark Forest," Ashfur's voice sliced through my thoughts. He flicked his tail toward the imposing figure standing beside him. I barely heard the words, my eyes locked on Tigerstar, the legendary leader who nearly tore the forest apart.

"Yeah, so you better not screw up," Tigerstar growled, and I didn't know whether to purr or cringe. Both seemed equally fitting.

I barely caught Ashfur's next words, my gaze still fixed on Tigerstar, unable to tear myself away from his cold, dark eyes that seemed to pierce right through me.

Suddenly, Ashfur's voice exploded in my ear, sharp as a whip. "Get into position! I'm going to teach you how to fight!" His tone made it clear he wasn't asking.

I snapped out of my trance and backed up a few tail-lengths. I took a shaky breath, trying to focus. Tigerstar was still watching, his stare as heavy as a thunderstorm cloud. I tried to block him out and instead focused on Ashfur, who at least wasn't as terrifying as the cat who nearly conquered the entire forest.

"So, we're facing each other in battle," Ashfur said, crouching low and unsheathing his claws. "What's the first thing you do?"

His sudden shift into battle stance made my fur prickle, and I took an instinctive step backward, unsure. He cocked his head, clearly enjoying the fact that I was still so unsure.

I watched him closely, mimicking his position as best as I could. But

with my small frame and barely-developed muscles, I probably looked like a kit pretending to play warrior, more like a bedraggled mouse than a fighter.

My heart pounded. I wasn't even an apprentice yet! How was I supposed to take on a battle-hardened warrior like Ashfur? How was I supposed to fight someone who could probably take down a whole patrol by himself?

But there was no way I was going to admit that. Not in front of *him*.

Without thinking, I pounced. My claws extended, aiming for Ashfur's chest—but before I could even make contact, he slammed his paw into my side, sending me tumbling through the air. A squeak of pain escaped me, but I managed to stretch my paws wide and land on all fours instead of belly-flopping like a clumsy kit.

Ashfur purred with amusement. "Impressive," he muttered, half to himself. "Come at me again!"

I hissed in frustration and launched myself at him again, determined not to be made a fool. But my jump was off this time. Ashfur easily knocked me aside with a swift paw, sending me crashing to the ground. This time, I hit the ground with a thud, rolling onto my side.

I heard Ashfur's purrs of amusement, followed by a darker chuckle that could only be Tigerstar's. I didn't even think that cat was capable of feeling joy, let alone showing any emotion. It made my skin crawl.

I lay there, seething. My chest tightened with embarrassment and anger. *I'm trying my best!* I thought to myself. *Why are they laughing?*

I stayed still for a few heartbeats, nursing my frustration, before suddenly feeling teeth sink into my flank.

"Don't fret, scrap," Ashfur's voice came through his tight grip, his mouth full as he lifted me off the ground like I was nothing. As he carried me back to the clearing with me in his mouth, I almost felt his grip getting tighter and tighter.

With a grunt, Ashfur dropped me back down. I staggered to my paws, shaking dirt and grass from my fur. As I looked up at him, I saw something in his eyes. A glint. Not of amusement, but of... something else. A strange mixture of satisfaction, maybe even *malice*.

I had to admit, it made me feel strange. And for a moment, I questioned my choice of deciding to come here. *What does he want with me?* I thought, my stomach turning uncomfortably. *Does he really just want to train me?*

I then closed my eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath. *I have to hope. There's no turning back now.*

Tigerstar's voice then sliced through the air, sharp as a claw. "Ashfur." He beckoned his apprentice with a flick of his tail, and Ashfur smirked at me one last time before padding over to Tigerstar.

The two of them exchanged quiet words I couldn't hear, the darkness around them thickening with every passing moment. *What the heck are they talking about?* The waiting to find out was unbearable.

When Ashfur finally returned, his face was set in a hard, determined expression. He was clearly holding something back, something *dangerous*.

"Alright, Swiftkit," Ashfur said, his voice steady, "when you wake up next sunrise, you'll have learned fighting moves no other apprentice or warrior in the Clan knows."

My ears flicked, a twist of nervousness and excitement churning in my stomach.

This... this could be amazing. I *had* to take this chance.

I mean, ThunderClan would be *shocked!* I'd be the youngest kit with *real* fighting skills. I'd show them all. I couldn't wait to see the look on their faces when they saw what I could do.

And so, for the rest of the night, Ashfur drilled me with a mix of

complex strategies and fighting techniques. Every now and then, Tigerstar would step in, offering tips or adjusting my form with a few cold words.

The whole experience was surreal—*I was training with the Dark Forest's greatest!*

I couldn't help the huge excited expression spreading across my face as I tried out the new moves. This was my chance to be the best, to prove that even as a kit, I could rise above and show ThunderClan what I was made of.

But just as I was about to attempt one last move, the world around me started to blur. The trees and fog around me melted away like mist in the morning sun.

"You're waking up," Tigerstar's voice rumbled, low and calm. "We'll see you tomorrow night, Swiftkit."

I gave a silent nod, watching as the shadows of Tigerstar and Ashfur began to fade. My heart was still racing, but before I knew it, my eyes shot open.

Bright light blinded me for a moment. I blinked rapidly, trying to adjust to the nursery. Poppyfrost and her kits were gone. The familiar sounds of camp filled my ears—high-pitched mewls from the kits outside playing.

I started to stand, but a sharp pain in my side made me wince. Goldenshine, who clearly had stayed with me the whole night, watched me carefully from where she lay in the nest.

"Swiftkit, are you alright?" she asked, her voice laced with concern.

I glared at her. For some reason, her worry rubbed me the wrong way. I didn't need her hovering over me, especially after everything I'd been through.

"I'm fine!" I snapped, frustration bubbling up.

Goldenshine didn't flinch, but I could see the concern in her gray eyes. "You were wriggling and whimpering all night," she said

gently. "Poppyfrost and Daisy were worried about you too."

I bared my teeth, my temper flaring. I was training with Tigerstar, for StarClan's sake! What did she think she knew? "I'm just sore from playing yesterday," I lied quickly, trying to push past her. "Now can I go outside?"

Goldenshine let out a long sigh, her eyes closing in resignation. "Yes, Swiftkit," she said softly. "But please, be careful."

Without another word, I shot out of the nest, still wincing from the soreness in my muscles. Outside, Poppyfrost's kits were already playing with an old piece of fresh-kill.

But as I watched them, a smirk began to emerge on my face. *They'll be so jealous when they see how tough I am*, I thought. Great StarClan, I couldn't *wait* to train again in the Dark Forest. There was so much more to learn. So much more to prove.

Chapter 8

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

"Briarpaw, from this day forward you will be known as Briarlight. StarClan honors you for your perseverance and spirit." Firestar's meow echoed throughout the camp.

"Bumblestripe! Blossomfall! Briarlight!" the Clan yowled in triumph for the three newly-made warriors.

I turned my head to look over at Briarlight, whose head was held high as Firestar licked her shoulder. I couldn't help but feel a pang of sympathy for her, as she would never be able to truly become a warrior.

Soon after the storm that had caused the tree to fall on Briarlight and Longtail, Briarlight woke up in the medicine den to realize that she couldn't move her back legs. It had now been confirmed that she was permanently paralyzed in her back legs. I admired how well she had handled all of it.

With Swiftkit behind me, I walked up to the three littermates and congratulated them, while Swiftkit gave them a curt nod. I looked back to him and smiled, glad that he cared to acknowledge the three warriors. But immediately, he started trudging back towards the nursery.

I was starting to worry about him. He had been nothing but exhausted lately. Everywhere he went with his tail to the ground, and he snapped at me almost every time I said anything as simple as "how are you?" to him. He had become even more irritable if that was even possible. I was with him all of the time, and hadn't noticed anything that would make him act this way, which I suppose made me worry even more.

I shook my head slowly as I started to follow him to the nursery.

Just as Swiftkit was about to crawl into the nursery, he passed Molekit, Snowkit, and Cherrykit playing mossball. Cherrykit let out a loud gasp. Swiftkit paused.

"Swiftkit, what happened to you?" Cherrykit exclaimed.

I paused as soon as Cherrykit spoke, my heart seemingly skipping a few beats. "What?" I ran up closer to Swiftkit to try to get a glimpse of what Cherrykit was referring to, but Swiftkit immediately jumped away from me. "What do you mean? It's nothing!"

Cherrykit's eyes were so wide, I almost thought that they were going to pop out of her head. She ran over to Swiftkit, whose fur was starting to bristle. "You have a huge gash in your flank! Are you hurt?" Cherrykit asked frantically, running her small tail along Swiftkit's flank.

As panicked as I was, I tried to suppress a small smile. It was clear that Cherrykit was truly concerned for her friend.

She's so patient with him, even when he's so irritable like this, I thought.

Swiftkit let out a small hiss and pulled away from the ginger she-kit. "Like I said, it's nothing! Get away from me!" He growled.

Great StarClan!

My mouth dropped instantly after Swiftkit's harsh words. I was about to scold him until I saw Cherrykit, her eyes filled with hurt. Without another word, she backed away and then turned to walk towards Molekit, her brother. Molekit wrapped his tail around his sister and looked at Swiftkit with narrowed eyes.

"Ignore him, Cherrykit," mewed Molekit, "He's just a mean furball."

I didn't know whether Swiftkit heard the comment or not, for he had already disappeared into the nursery. Although Cherrykit was hurt, she was staring at where he had disappeared.

I shook my head quickly and then followed Swiftkit into the nursery. He was limping towards our nest with his tail dragging the ground.

I narrowed my eyes at Swiftkit and sat down in front of the entrance of the nursery. "Pardon me if I interrupt the rough day you're having, or should I say *days*, but I must ask - what is going on with you?"

Before Swiftkit got the chance to answer, I actually got a good glimpse of his small flank. I couldn't believe what I was looking at. Like Cherrykit had said, there was a huge gash along his flank. It was deep, and it did not look like it was going to recover instantly.

And from what little I have learned from the medicine den, I thought, *it looks like it is on its way to infection!*

"Swiftkit! What in the name of StarClan?" I exclaimed. He rolled his eyes as I quickly picked him up and stormed out of the nursery. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the three other kits from the nursery watching. Molekit was still close to Cherrykit, but Snowkit was off to the side, eyes wide.

I burst into the medicine den, setting down Swiftkit, almost seemingly dropping him because of how rushed I felt. I looked back up to find Jayfeather sorting through his herbs, as usual, but he looked incredibly deep in thought.

But clearly, now, that wouldn't matter to me!

"Jayfeather!" I yowled. "Swiftkit is hurt!"

"Oh, foxfung," Swiftkit said, clearly annoyed as he slowly shook his head.

But I ignored him. "He has a huge gash on his flank! It looks infected! Please help!"

Jayfeather let out a snort as he finally seemed to be turning his attention to me. "Alright, alright, Goldenshine, keep your fur on!" He began. "I'm sure it's no big deal."

I rolled my eyes. *She-cats, let alone mothers, may be dramatic, but he better take me seriously!* I thought anxiously.

I pushed Swiftkit towards Jayfeather so that he could see to the

wound. Jayfeather ran his paw along Swiftkit's flank. His eyes narrowed.

Jayfeather then bent his head down to sniff Swiftkit's flank, and after a few heartbeats, he froze.

My tail was swishing back and forth anxiously. "What? What is it?"

Swiftkit rolled his eyes again. "Goldenshine, I'm telling you, it's nothing!"

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," Jayfeather finally meowed, his eyes still narrowed.

Swiftkit shot an angry glance at Jayfeather. "Yeah, right!"

"Hey, I'm supposed to be the stubborn cat in this Clan, not you. I'm also the one here who knows what he's talking about, so I'd set your tail down in a nest!"

Swiftkit let out a long, annoyed sigh and lied down in the nearest nest.

Jayfeather immediately returned to his herbs, my gaze following him. "Well?" I asked. "How bad is it? What's wrong?"

Jayfeather was quickly grabbing the herbs he needed, glancing back at Swiftkit with every few heartbeats. "The gash on his flank is infected. He should be okay, but I'll need to tend to it immediately."

I let out an exasperated sigh, and then I realized something.

In all of my hysterics, I haven't even given any thought as to how Swiftkit was injured! Geez, what a great mother I am!

But I pushed away my own self deprecation to ask Swiftkit, "Swiftkit, how did this even happen?"

Swiftkit hesitated for a few heartbeats.

He then finally answered, "Well, I don't know! I may have cut it on a thorn again, or I could have been playing too roughly with the

other kits."

I titled my head, not really buying it. "Cherrykit, Molekit and Snowkit looked just fine. Was it just you playing a little too roughly?"

Before I could press Swiftkit further, I noticed how intensely Jayfeather was looking at Swiftkit with his blind eyes as he tended to his wound.

Oh no, is something wrong? My heart starting beating twice as fast again.

"What? What's wrong? Is something wrong?" I asked Jayfeather, forgetting to give Swiftkit's lame excuse for his injury any thought.

Jayfeather's eyes seemed to blaze as he looked back at me. He seemed very frustrated that I had interrupted him, more frustrated than usual. "He will be fine!" He hissed. "Now, either give me a few seconds of silence, or leave me in peace."

I rolled my eyes and kept quiet, not taking his words to heart. *He may be an irritable little mouse-brain, but he's amazing at what he does,* I realized.

I watched in silence as Jayfeather applied marigold to Swiftkit's infection, still looking at him with the same intense gaze, but I knew better now than to ask him any more questions about it.

As Jayfeather did this, Swiftkit began to drift off into sleep. As his breathing slowed, indicating that he was, in fact, asleep, Jayfeather shook his head quickly, closing his blind eyes, and then looking back up at me.

"It's all finished," he told me. "He should make a full recovery."

I let out a loud sigh of relief and then walked over to sit down by Swiftkit. I looked down at him to see that he seemed to be in a deep sleep.

He sure needs it, I thought, *he always looks as if he can't talk one more pawstep*.

I looked up again to see that Jayfeather's gaze was burning into mine, his eyes narrowed once again.

"What?" I asked, suddenly feeling a little worried and defensive.

Jayfeather didn't completely answer my question. "Are you with Swiftkit at pretty much all times?" He asked, seemingly interrogational.

I narrowed my eyes back at him. "Yes..." I answered, wondering where he was going with this.

"How does he sleep?"

I was becoming more and more confused, but still answered, "Well...he wriggles a lot, I suppose, and during the day he acts like he hasn't gotten any sleep at all...but I've never been awake and caught him awake."

Jayfeather didn't respond, but just continued to stare, looking as if he was drowning in his own thoughts.

"What?" I asked again, becoming irritated. *Why is he pressing me like this?*

Again, not answering my question, Jayfeather just shakes his head quickly and walks back to his herbs, yet again. "How's Snowkit?" He asked, obviously trying to change the subject.

Honestly, I was relieved Jayfeather was changing the subject, I didn't want to give much thought as to why Jayfeather seemed suspicious of Swiftkit.

I answered him, "She is doing just fine! She seems to be fitting in with the other kits very well. Cherrykit and Molekit love her!"

They really did. Although Snowkit was extremely shy, she was lovely to get to know once she is comfortable with other cats. She was playful, kind, and all around fun to be with.

Just like Snowflight was... I realized to myself.

Although I had given Jayfeather lots of positive comments about Snowkit, he was silent. I didn't expect him to leap out of the den and reward Snowkit with some fresh-kill...

But some verbal reaction would be nice.

I broke the silence. "Have you heard from her and seen her in StarClan, or something?" I asked, eager to know. It would give me a nice sense of comfort to know that Snowflight really was watching over us like she said she would.

"No," Jayfeather said.

Trying to ignore how short Jayfeather was being, I joked, "Maybe it's because you pulled a thorn out of her paw and sent her away!"

More silence.

Just when I had began to think that Jayfeather didn't care to talk about Snowflight anymore, I heard him let out a shaky sigh. He had clearly been trying to suppress his emotions.

I walked up closer to him as he murmured, "I miss Snowflight."

I closed my eyes as they began to cloud with emotion. Without having to give it any thought, I agreed. "Me too, Jayfeather."

Jayfeather lowered his head and shook it slowly.

I hesitated and then asked, "Do you think that you'll ever be able to get past the fact that she is reincarnated in Snowkit?" I certainly knew that at times, I was still overcome with grief at the loss of my sister. Though she had been killed moons ago, the image of her frail dead body still haunted my thoughts every day. I still couldn't believe that after so long, that she was gone.

I knew that Jayfeather felt the same. Still unbelievably to me, he had fallen for his own apprentice, and had lost her so soon. It was strange seeing Jayfeather, such a prickly cat, act in this way.

As hard as losing Snowflight had been for me, knowing that she was inside of Snowkit almost gave me a comforting feeling, knowing

that my sister was in there somewhere, still with me.

"One day I will," Jayfeather finally answered. "As much as I may love her, she is gone. If I spent all of my time thinking about her and the fact that she is in that kit, I wouldn't have any time to worry about everything else that's going on."

Hm... what else could he possibly have going on that isn't medicine cat duties? I wondered, but not overthinking it.

I turned my gaze back to my sleeping son, my eyes narrowing. "How do you think Swiftkit *really* got this wound?" I asked Jayfeather.

Before he could answer, I heard a loud yowl come from outside. Immediately I recognized my father's voice, "You little mouse-brain! What were you thinking?"

Chapter 9

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

Oh no, what's Thornclaw yowling on about? I asked myself as I took a peek out of the medicine den.

I turned my head towards the camp entrance to see Leafpool, Birchfall, Thornclaw, and Dusty walking into the camp. Dusty was a little ways behind with his head and tail down. I suddenly realized that it had been Dusty that Thornclaw was yelling at.

What happened?

I stayed where I was as I saw Thornclaw suddenly start to scold Dusty some more. It was in a lower voice, so I couldn't hear exactly what was being said.

Firestar also seemed to have heard what I had as the patrol had walked back into camp. He walked up to Thornclaw, who was now just shaking his head slowly at Dusty, who hadn't looked up since he'd come back.

"What happened?" Firestar asked as he approached Thornclaw.

Thornclaw flicked his tail, gesturing to Dusty. "This little furball saw a rabbit and thought it would be fun to chase it into WindClan territory, where he eventually was able to *catch* it! He *stole* WindClan prey!"

I tilted my head in fascination. *He caught a rabbit? Wow!*

Firestar remained level-headed, but his eyes narrowed. "Was he caught by a patrol?"

Thornclaw hesitated and then answered, "Well, no... but that doesn't make it right, Firestar!"

Firestar ignored Thornclaw's tone. "I do agree with you on that part, Thornclaw, but this was Dusty's first patrol. He just wanted to come along, didn't he? I'm sure you gave him enough scolding to learn for the next time."

Thornclaw didn't say anything else, and just snorted as he walked over to the fresh-kill pile with the rest of the cats that had been on patrol. I saw Lilypetal walk up to Thornclaw and start to rub her tail gently along his flank, trying to calm him down.

I watched my parents, my stomach suddenly twisting. It had felt so long since I had had a relationship like that, with Breezepelt.

I still missed him, of course. He was known to be a brutal and snappy cat, but with me, he was so gentle and kind. But honestly, all of our times together felt like a distant memory. We were from different Clans; it would have never worked.

As hard as it was, I think I had managed to move on from the whole situation.

And it brought me Swiftkit, I realized, my heart beginning to swell as I looked back towards the medicine den where he was sleeping. *As strangely as he's been acting lately, I love him with all of my heart.*

Still deep in my thoughts, I managed to catch Dusty's gaze, who hadn't moved from his spot since the encounter with Firestar. He gave me a weak smile and walked over to me, still with his tail down. When he was a tail-length from me, he sat down and wrapped his tail around his paws.

"I can't believe how stupid I was," he began. "I heard Thornclaw yelling at me when I starting chasing the rabbit, but I didn't listen."

I took a step closer to him and put my tail on his shoulder. "Hey, it's no big deal, really! Don't worry, my father tends to have quite a short temper and makes things more than what they need to be. And it was your first time on patrol! You're bound to make mistakes."

Even though Dusty's head was still down, I could tell that a small

smile was beginning to form again on his face.

I continued, "And, hey, you *caught* the rabbit, didn't you? That's amazing!"

Dusty quickly lifted his head to look at me finally, his eyes suddenly sparkling. "Really?"

I nodded. "Absolutely! They're so swift and fast, it requires a lot of determination and concentration! It seemed to take me *forever* to finally nail catching a rabbit!" I explained to him.

Dusty listened to me intently as I spoke, his blue eyes still sparkling. "Wow... thank you, Goldenshine!" He said, sounding much brighter. After a couple of heartbeats he took a step closer to me. "You know... I'd love to learn some more hunting skills from you," he said shyly. "Maybe you could show me how to stay inside the ThunderClan border this time, heh..."

For some reason, my heart skipped a beat looking at Dusty's bashful and hopeful gaze.

He wants to spend time with me, I realized, my stomach suddenly fluttering.

I really wanted to join him, but I had Swiftkit in the medicine den, recovering from an infection.

I can't leave him, I realized, pushing down my excitement. I looked back at Swiftkit and then back to Dusty. "Aw, Dusty, I'd love to, but I should stay with Swiftkit while he rests." As much as I hated saying the words, it needed to be done.

Dusty's hopeful gazed saddened, but as he smiled and began to nod in understanding, I heard Jayfeather's footsteps come from the back of the medicine den.

He walked up to sit by Swiftkit in his nest. "Swiftkit will be fine." My eyes widened as he went on, teasingly, "I could do without you breathing down my neck for a little while. You can check on Swiftkit once you get back."

As Jayfeather was speaking, I noticed a sort of... *knowing* look in his blind eyes.

What is he up to? I thought, and my heart dropped as I realized exactly what.

Does he think I like Dusty? I wondered, suddenly coming to a revelation. *Do I? I mean, he seems like a really sweet tom, and talented, clearly, and handsome... but I barely know him yet!*

Without Dusty seeing, I tilted my head and looked at Jayfeather with a smirk on my face and eyes narrowed as I realized what his motive was. All he did was flick his tail towards the den entrance and say, "Okay, now seriously, get out of here before I make myself gain sight and claw your sorry flank out of here!"

I let out a purr of amusement and followed Dusty out of the den. As prickly as Jayfeather was most of the time, I was glad to have him as a friend. We've shared a lot together. We together avenged Snowflight, and we've stuck together as we've both grieved for her and confined in each other since she had "returned" to the Clan. Family aside, I probably trusted him more than any cat in ThunderClan.

And I guess I'll trust him as he tells me I can leave my son with him to go out hunting with a handsome tom, I joked to myself.

Speaking of, Dusty's eyes had seemed to be glowing as he realized I could come with him. My stomach began to flutter again as I began to walk towards the camp entrance, my mind swirling with a bunch of new thoughts.

He really seems to want to go out hunting with me... is he thinking the way I am? I wondered, but suddenly shaking my head quickly, *I'm probably reading too much into this.*

I wasn't too sure, but I had almost seemed to be falling into my same trap that I had fallen into with Breezepelt. It had only taken him a few words to convince me to meet with him that night. Of course, I regretted it now, and I never wanted to make a mistake like that again.

Dusty isn't in a different Clan though... I realized, but my heart dropped as I came up with another impediment. *But he's a kittypet. He and Pippy seem to like it here, but it probably won't last long. He'll probably be gone within a few sunrises.*

I seemed to forget these sad thoughts of Dusty leaving as soon as I looked up at his sparkling gaze as he waited by the camp entrance. Suddenly realizing how excited *I* was for this hunting trip, I quickly trotted towards Dusty to follow him into the forest.

Chapter 10

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

Having just finished a much needed nap, I walked out of the warriors den to see Goldenshine and Dusty trotting back into camp, side by side. I tilted my head in fascination as I noticed how happy they seemed to be. They were letting out purrs of laughter and seemed to never want to stop talking to each other.

It's nice that she's welcoming the kittypets, I thought. *Of course she is. As loyal of a warrior as she is, she will show compassion towards any cat.*

I continued to scan the camp as Goldenshine and Dusty walked over to sit near the Highledge and talk. Right under the Highledge, I saw Smudge and Firestar talking, Firestar's eyes wide with dismay.

"Leaving?" I heard Firestar exclaim. "Already?"

My moving gaze stopped as I heard Firestar's comment.

Smudge is leaving?

Wanting to hear more, I tried to think of a way I could possibly overhear what was going on. The fresh-kill pile, extremely close to where Firestar was sitting, caught my eye.

I am a little hungry, anyway.

I slowly began to pad towards the fresh-kill pile, trying not to catch Smudge or Firestar's attention. Once I arrived there, I sat myself down and pretended to thoroughly be searching for a juicy piece of prey.

I could clearly hear their exchange now. "I have definitely overstayed my welcome," Smudge admitted. "Me and the others have stayed much longer than expected."

As Firestar hesitated for a few heartbeats, I very slowly started to bend down to pick up a mouse, conserving my time.

Finally, Firestar nodded and said, "I understand, Smudge. Your Twolegs ought to be worried about you. I certainly won't get in your way."

Absentmindedly, I started to open my mouth up around the mouse. I heard Smudge meow, "Okay, Lilypetal, I may be a kittypet, but I know for a fact that no cat picks up their prey that slowly."

I rolled my eyes and dropped the mouse as Firestar turned to face me.

All he did was shake his head quickly and meow, "Nevermind that. Lilypetal, I suppose, out of any cat in ThunderClan, you ought to here this too."

I dipped my head, padded up to stand by Firestar and asked Smudge, "Are you really leaving?"

Smudge nodded, not needing to think about it at all. "Yes. As neat as this Clan life is, it is not how I want to spend my time, and I'm sure the other two feel the same way."

I saw Firestar glance over to the "other two" that Smudge was referring to. Dusty and Goldenshine were in their same spots, but Pippy had approached them, and they all seemed to be talking to each other excitedly.

"I suppose you should tell them the news?" Firestar inquired. "I'm sure they'll be wanting to come back with you."

Smudge nods and then calls over Pippy and Dusty. Immediately, both of their heads turned to where Smudge had called. They looked at each other and then slowly approached with their eyes wide. Goldenshine stayed back, but I noticed a very worried gleam in her gaze.

As Pippy and Dusty sat themselves down, Smudge told them what was going on.

To my surprise, both of the kittypets' eyes widened with shock and their mouths dropped. I noticed that Goldenshine looked dismayed as well.

Dusty stood up, as if ready to protest. "Leave? No way!" he exclaimed. "I want to stay. This Clan life is awesome!"

Dusty then realized how defiant he sounded. Meeting Firestar's gaze, he added shyly, "If you'd have me..."

While Pippy seemed surprised as well, she said nothing. Her eyes were filled with uncertainty.

Smudge suddenly seemed very preoccupied with new thoughts. "Do you all want to stay?"

It didn't take Dusty any time to answer. He gave a very definitive nod. I looked over to Pippy, who still seemed to unsure and deep in thought.

Smudge faced Dusty. "Are you sure?" He asks him.

Dusty nodded again. "Completely," he answers. "I have never felt more like myself like I am when I'm here. I've also felt so welcomed, and I love the feeling of catching your own prey, and protecting your own Clanmates and borders!"

Firestar let out a faint purr of amusement, while Goldenshine, who was standing now, looked quite excited.

I wonder if Goldenshine is part of the reason Dusty wants to stay so badly? I wondered.

Smudge nods and then faces Pippy. "What about you?"

The pretty young she-cat sighed. "I really, *really* love it here too. But I also miss home..." she says, still seeming scattered.

Firestar stepped closer to the two young cats. "You two are welcome to stay in the Clan and train if you would like, but if your Twoleg nest is your calling, that is okay too."

Pippy sighed and gave her brother a long, sad look, seeming to imply that she wanted to go home. Dusty returned the gaze and put the tip of his tail on her shoulder.

"We will miss your bright spirit, Pippy," Firestar commented as Goldenshine trotted up, touching her nose to Pippy's. A couple other Clanmates walked up and did the same. With Pippy's lovable personality, despite being a kittypet she had become well-liked in ThunderClan.

As Goldenshine had touched noses with Pippy, I tried to look deeper into my daughter's eyes. They were filled with sadness, but I also noticed a hint of satisfaction.

Maybe the excitement of Dusty staying isn't just one-sided, I realized.

Out of the corner of my eye I could see Pippy and Dusty sharing a few words, and then finally touching noses. As I was watching them, Firestar turned to me.

"Lilypetal, would you and Thornclaw be able to escort Smudge and Pippy to the ThunderClan border?"

I dipped my head as Thornclaw padded over, clearly having heard Firestar's request. He gave me a quick lick on the ear in greeting.

"And I'm sure you'll want to say goodbye to your old friend," Firestar said thoughtfully. I nodded as Firestar added, "Speaking of goodbyes..." I watched as Firestar walked over to Smudge, and they exchanged a few words.

This is probably harder for Firestar than most cats realize, I thought, *Smudge is Firestar's oldest friend.*

Smudge was one of the only cats that Firestar had been close with before he came to the forest to become a warrior. I'm sure that goodbye had been hard enough...

Sometimes second goodbyes are as hard as the first... I realized. *Hopefully Firestar will be alright!*

Finally, Smudge nods to Firestar and beckons Pippy with his tail.

Thornclaw and I waited at the camp entrance. Smudge immediately started to travel to us, but Pippy followed very slowly behind, seeming to hesitate with every pawstep.

As Thornclaw, Smudge and I began to walk into the forest, I heard Pippy yowl, "Wait!"

We all stopped, and I heard Thornclaw snort beside me. I nudged my mate with my shoulder.

Pippy took a step back and mewed, "I don't know if I want to go..."

"Great StarClan," Thornclaw muttered. I turned my head towards Thornclaw and narrowed my eyes at him.

Smudge walked up to Pippy. "What do you want to do?" He asked calmly.

Pippy hesitated for quite a few heartbeats. Finally, Firestar walked up to face her.

"Possibly she could stay for a few more sunrises?" He suggested. "She could think about it and make her decision then."

"Is that what you want to do?" Smudge asked Pippy, putting his tail on her shoulder.

Pippy nodded, seeming more sure of herself. "Yes, I will do that!"

Smudge nods and touches his nose to hers. "If you don't return to the house, I wish you well."

Finally, Smudge trotted up to the camp entrance where Thornclaw and I were waiting and we walked out into the forest. Immediately, Smudge trailed ahead of us.

He's probably anxious to get back home, I realized.

Thornclaw, who was flanking me as we walked together, turned his head to look at me. "Will you miss Smudge?" He asked.

"Definitely," I answered. "Seeing him again makes me realize how

much of an impact he had on me when I was such a young kit... *and* so much beyond that. But at the same time..."

I then let out a sniff. "Getting to see him at *all* after leaving my kittypet life is more than I could have ever asked for. I'm forever thankful for this time I've gotten with him."

Not waiting for Thornclaw to respond, I nudged him and joked, "I'm sure you're quite happy to see another kittypet go."

Thornclaw looked down to the ground and shook his head. "I can't disagree with you on that. But that's just how I've always been, and I've been told to be wary of outsiders," he explains. "But I'm trying not to let that stuff get to me as much anymore."

"Why?" I asked, tilting my head.

"Firestar always seems to want to welcome new cats, so as hard as it may be, I have to abide by him."

I nodded to him in understanding.

Suddenly, he turned his head to me, this time his eyes sparkling, reprising his words he had said to me when the three kittypets had arrived a while ago, "And, I suppose giving kittypets a chance brought you to me, so... I can't really complain, can I?"

My heart skipped a beat at Thornclaw's kind words. I purred loudly and touched my muzzle to his.

"Okay, lovebirds! I think this is where your border ends!"

I looked ahead to see Smudge waiting by what was indeed the ThunderClan border.

Thornclaw and I glanced at each other and then ran ahead to meet Smudge.

Smudge let out a sigh as I sat down next to him. "Well, Lilypetal, I guess this is it," he meowed, nudging my shoulder with his tail.

I dipped my head. "It was amazing getting to see you again, and

knowing that you're doing so well!" I stepped closer to Smudge and leaned in closer so Thornclaw wouldn't hear, "And feel free to pay another visit anytime, we'd love to have you!"

Smudge let out a quiet purr of amusement and nodded to me.

Thornclaw simply dipped his head to Smudge. Smudge dipped his head back and began to walk up the trail that led to the Twoleg nest.

Suddenly, he stopped and turned back around to face me. "Hey, would you possibly want to go farther with me and drop me off at the Twoleg nest?" He asked. "You could take a quick look at your old home!"

My eyes widened at the question. I immediately answered, "I probably shouldn't..."

I really was unsure. As neat as it would be to get to see where I had lived such a soft life a long time ago, it wouldn't be doing my loyalty to ThunderClan any favors, as brief as the trip would be.

I turned to see that Thornclaw also looked surprised, but not unsure at all.

I'm glad he's not questioning my loyalties at all.

I pondered it for a few heartbeats. *It would only be for just a bit,* I thought, *but still...*

I looked up to see that Smudge was waiting on my answer. I shook my head quickly. "As cool as it would be to go back to my roots, I really wouldn't want any cat to question my loyalty," I told him.

Smudge didn't accept that answer. "You would just be stopping by!" He insisted, and then joked, "Maybe paying a visit would only make you realize how thankful you are to still be a Clan cat instead!"

I again thought about how neat it would be to see my old home. The old windows I looked out of, the areas in the yard I played around in, the flowers I would lie in and sniff...

I remembered the day that I had finally decided to leave my housefolk. At the time, it seemed like such an impulsive move to leap off of that fence and walk out into the forest, but now I couldn't be happier with my choice.

I turned again to look at Thornclaw, who surprisingly, was just waiting patiently for my answer, seeming to understand my conflict.

"What do you think?" I asked him.

He blinked at me. "Lilypetal, I don't doubt your loyalty even a little bit," he said, shockingly. "If you want to take a look, I understand."

I suddenly was overwhelmed with love. Even when Thornclaw was typically such a stickler, he always worked so hard to try and understand me.

As I gave Thornclaw an appreciative look, he meowed, "I'll just hunt around and wait for you until you get back." He then walked up to me, nudged me, and teasingly said, "Which you had better do!"

I smiled at Thornclaw and touched noses with him. Then, I began to escort Smudge up the trail towards the Twoleg nest.

With a start, I realized that I had not walked along this trail since I had first come to the Clans and trespassed on ThunderClan territory.

It all seems like so long ago...

Sooner than I expected, Smudge and I arrived at the Twoleg nest - I recognized it immediately - the white picket fence, the fluffy green grass and the white wooden house. I could hardly believe my eyes. I didn't think I'd ever gaze at this structure again.

Deep in my thoughts, I suddenly hear a cat yell, "Is that a Smudge that I smell?"

Suddenly, I saw a cat appear at the top of the fence. He was a tom with dark ginger fur and blue eyes.

Smudge let out a purr of amusement and answered, "You smelled correctly!"

The tom smiled and then leaped onto the ground where Smudge and I were and touched noses with Smudge. When the tom faced me, his eyes widened and then seemed to be gleaming.

"Who's that?" The tom asked, tilting his head but not averting his gaze.

Smudge lashed his tail towards me. "That's Lilypetal. She's one of those wild cats that lives in the forest."

Jerry finally dipped his head. "I'm Jerry," he meowed, introducing himself to me. "I live with Smudge in this Twoleg nest."

"Jerry was adopted and brought in to live with me just a couple seasons ago," Smudge explained. "He had been found as a stray and came to our nest fresh out of the vet! He had this weird white thing wrapped around his face..."

Suddenly, Smudge stopped, and he nudged Jerry, who I just realized had been looking at me the whole time that Smudge was talking.

"I wouldn't do that, Jerry," Smudge commented, half-teasingly, "She's already spoken for!"

Jerry suddenly shakes his head and lets out a snort. "What are you talking about?" He asks defensively, "Like I'd ever pad after a weird forest cat!"

I ignored that.

Jerry changed the subject and asked Smudge, "Where are those two young ones? They've missed a lot of good meals, that's for sure!"

Smudge quickly explained to Jerry the situation - Dusty was intent on staying and Pippy wanted to figure things out.

Jerry snorted again and rolled his eyes. "Good for them, I guess," he meowed. "They were a little too chaotic for me sometimes!"

Smudge shrugged and then turned to look at me. He then scans the whole Twoleg nest, lashing his tail to indicate that I should do the same. "So, what do you think?" He asked. "Is it as fabulous as you remember?"

I purred in amusement. "Sure, we'll go with that," I answered sarcastically.

Suddenly, as I looked at the house, a pang of guilt overcame me, and I felt like I couldn't stay any longer. It wasn't a matter of wanting to come back and be a kittypet, but I didn't want to stay away from ThunderClan territory too long for the purpose of looking at my old Twoleg nest!

I dipped my head politely to the two toms. "As lovely as all of this is, I really should be going," I meowed.

I then shifted my gaze over to Smudge, and for the first time, the reality of this situation hit me - I was *leaving* Smudge, and I had no idea when I'd see him again. *He means so much to me... and having him around has been more than wonderful,* I then thought. *I seriously have no idea when I'll see him again.*

I then took a deep breath, trying to lift my own spirits. *But that's what I said the last time - when I left my kittypet life,* I told myself. *Lighten up - you never know what life will bring.*

With another deep breath, I then padded up to Smudge and touched my nose to his. "Goodbye, Smudge," I told the older tom. "I can't even begin to describe how much it has meant to me to see you again."

Smudge also seemed to take a long, deep breath, and I could tell that he was having as much of a hard time with this situation as I was. "Likewise, Lily. Lily*petal*," he meowed to me, bringing me to let out a small purr of amusement.

He then pulled away so that he could meet my gaze. I could hardly stand to look at the look of pride, yet sadness that glowed in his yellow eyes. "I can't even begin to describe how much it means to *me* to see how you've grown, and who you've become." He then

sniffed in amazement and gave a shrug. "You are a Clan cat through and through. I knew it with Firestar, and I knew it with you. And that fact that I was able to contribute to you and your journey..."

He then gave me a single nod. "Let's just say I'm one proud housecat."

I then was at a loss for words, overwhelmed with emotion when the black and white tom padded up to me, touching his nose to my head. "Goodbye, Lilypetal. Be safe out there."

When Smudge pulled away once again, I gave the most sincere nod I could in return. "I promise, *promise* that I will." I then took a deep breath, bracing myself for my next words. "Goodbye, Smudge."

I then flicked my ears towards the other cat that I just now realized had been watching us this whole time, and I quickly gave Jerry an apologetic look. "Sorry about that. We have a bit of history, as you can see," I meowed sheepishly to the housecat. I then dipped my head to him. "It was nice to meet you."

And after giving Smudge one last nod in farewell, I forced myself to begin padding back towards my territory.

That is, until I heard Jerry's meow telling me to wait.

I stopped in my tracks, rolling my eyes without him seeing. *Great StarClan, what could this be about?*

And to my complete disappointment, I turned around to see Jerry trotting towards me. "I should escort you to your border!" He suggested, his eyes determined. "Isn't it dangerous to walk around here alone or something?"

I hesitated. I really wouldn't prefer for this kittypet tom, who possibly had taken an interest in me, to escort me to my own border.

But he was clearly a dear friend of Smudge's... for some reason, and I felt reluctant putting him off like that. *Ugh... darn it.*

However, I only gave him a nod and a flick of my tail before

continuing in my travel. Not really wanting to give this tom much of *anything*.

Unfortunately for me though, Jerry's eyes lit up in excitement and he walked up to travel next to me, where I took a step to my left as his fur brushed mine.

As we traveled through the forest, Jerry tried to make conversation. "So, you live in a place with a lot of cats? What is that like?"

I briefly explained to him the concept of the Clans and then answered, "It is very nice. I feel like everyone in the Clan has my back, and that they'll always be looking out for me."

Jerry narrowed his eyes and let a smirk emerge on his face. "I'd certainly want to do that too, if I was a Clanmate of yours."

My eyes widened, and I tried not to let it show how taken aback I was.

This tom is full-on flirting with me! I realized. *Does he realize that I'm already mates with another tom I love dearly?*

I remembered how just moments before, Smudge had told Jerry that I had a mate. *Obviously he doesn't care about that!*

Luckily, before I had to come up with a response, Jerry and I arrived at the ThunderClan border, where I saw Thornclaw burying a new catch. He looked up and immediately narrowed his eyes.

Oh, dear.

"Welcome back," he murmured, his eyes still narrowed. In a hurry to explain what was going on to Thornclaw, I gave a nod to Jerry and then walked over to my mate, touching his cheek with my nose.

I turned again to look at Jerry. "Thank you, Jerry. It was nice to meet you."

Jerry, his eyes sparkling, answered, "The pleasure is all mine, Lilypetal."

Finally, he lashed his tail and began to walk back up the trail.

As soon as he was out of our sight, Thornclaw turned to face me. "Friend of yours?" He asked, shifting his paws from side to side.

I snorted. "Hardly," I mewed. "I practically met him a few heartbeats ago."

Thornclaw narrowed his eyes again and looked at where the dark ginger tom had disappeared. "It sure didn't seem like that to Jerry!"

"What do you mean?" I asked him, starting to get nervous. I was hoping Thornclaw wouldn't get angry over a silly tom that barely meant anything to me.

"I am a tom myself, Lilypetal," he began to explain, "I am also a tom that has fallen for a she-cat. I know the signs."

I sighed. "What in the name of StarClan are you talking about?"

"This *Jerry* is clearly very fond of you, understandably, but I wouldn't prefer that he escort you to the border."

I shook my head slowly. "It's not a long way at all!" I insisted, "I'm sure some kittypets lose their minds being cooped up, anyway. So I'm sure I wasn't the prime reason for his escort. I only said yes because I wanted to get home!"

Thornclaw just snorted.

I suddenly came to a realization. "Are you jealous?" I asked. "Oh, Thornclaw, if you know me, you know very well you have no reason to be!"

Thornclaw sighed. "I know, I know..." he conceded. "I just didn't like the way he was looking at you."

I let out a purr of amusement, and then teased, "What? Are you going to get jealous now every time a tom so much as looks at me?"

Thornclaw hesitated, rolled his eyes, and then answered, "Well, if that was the case, then I'd have to be jealous all of the time,

wouldn't I?"

Awww.

With those words, I felt my stomach flip upside down. Even when Thornclaw was bitter he managed to make me feel so special. I let out a little purr and nuzzled my muzzle into his neck. "Aw, you're sweet," I meowed.

Thornclaw snorted again and then nuzzled back, finally letting himself warm up a little despite his bitterness. "Of course you know that I would never not trust you, Lilypetal," he whispered, "But if I ever see that tom again, it'll be too soon."

I let out another *mrrow* of laughter, and finally Thornclaw and I started to travel back to camp. As Thornclaw looked around at the forest, I gazed at him. I found his jealousy quite adorable, and I loved that despite how passive-aggressively he had gone about it, he clearly had been worried that another tom was padding after me.

Oh, Thornclaw, I thought to myself, *no cat could ever make me as happy as you do.*

My thoughts averted to the short amount of time I had spent back at my Twoleg nest. No pleasant thoughts were there.

Smudge was right, I realized, *it only made me know that I made the right choice, and that it did!*

I could not be more thankful of where I had ended up - I had a strong and lovable Clan that I would fight to the death for, a family that I loved dearly, and I mate that I knew that would love me and be by my side no matter what, even when he had some doubts about some kittypet tom.

As I thought about this, and how happy I was, I twinned my tail with Thornclaw's as we continued to walk back to camp.

Chapter 11

[image]

Swiftkit's POV

I had been lying in Jayfeather's den for what felt like moons. If I tried to do so much as sit up, he would snap at me. All I wanted to do was get up, leave this den...

And claw Goldenshine's eyes out.

Not really, but I couldn't believe that she had blown my cover to Jayfeather. I didn't know exactly what he knew, but it seemed like he knew I was up to *something*.

Jayfeather is weird, I thought, trying to rationalize, *he probably doesn't know anything, and I'm just being paranoid.*

I turned my head to the entrance of the medicine den to see that it was nearly moonhigh. Cats were stirring, starting to work their way to their dens.

I'm in the medicine den, I realized, *will Ashfur and Tigerstar come visit me tonight, nevertheless?*

I then turned to look at Jayfeather, who was padding over to me. He sat down next to my nest, ran his tail over my wound and then sniffed it. I tensed up as he did this.

"Hm, it looks like it's getting better," he commented. "Lucky you."

I let out a small huff, detecting Jayfeather's sarcasm. *Well, that's good, I guess.*

I had gotten the wound at another battle training session with Ashfur. I had been trying to learn how to defend myself rather than attack.

"I am going to attack you," Ashfur had told me, unsheathing his

claws. "Do all you can to defend yourself and... not allow for any wounds." For whatever reason, when he had said that last part, his eyes had been gleaming with determination.

My eyes had immediately gone down to his unsheathed claws. "Shouldn't we do this with claws sheathed?" I had asked, trying not to seem nervous. "I think that's what they do in Clan battle training."

Ashfur had hissed and said, "Foxdung! That won't get an apprentice anywhere. What if a Clan of warriors were to attack your camp, having declared a war, and they leaped into the apprentices' den? Young apprentices would have no idea how to defend themselves with sheathed claws!" Ashfur explained. "You're getting a head start."

I nodded in understanding. *That's true*, I had thought. *Why don't ThunderClan warriors train like this?*

I unsheathed my small claws and dug them into the ground, also lashing my tail back and forth, waiting for Ashfur's attack.

I barely had time to prepare any more, for only heartbeats after Ashfur's lecture, he had leaped at me, claws out and teeth bared.

I let out a squeak of fear and tried to leap out of the way, but Ashfur was faster. He landed on top of me, his eyes blaring, and then raked his claws along my flank, causing the injury that seemingly every cat in ThunderClan was freaking out about.

I had yowled in pain, not being able to bear it. Ashfur bent his head down and hissed in my ear, "That's what you get."

I let out a sigh of relief as he backed up off of me. "What do you mean?" I asked, breathless.

Ashfur had stood staring for several heartbeats, his eyes narrowed. He looked like he had wanted to spit an insult at me, but he held back. He shook his head quickly and said, "You didn't get away fast enough! If you want to be the best warrior in the forest, you're going to have to do better than that."

I tilted my head, finally starting to calm down, but still shaken by Ashfur's fierce attack. Realizing how much I had let it get to me, I dug my claws into the dry earth in frustration.

He's right. If I want to be the best warrior I can be, I have to deal with whatever is thrown at me.

I had woken up that morning feeling unbearable pain all over again. I had looked up to see that Goldenshine was still asleep. I turned my body to look at my flank. I held in a gasp to see that the wound that Ashfur had given me looked awful. It was deep and covered in dried blood.

I can't *let Goldenshine see this*, I had realized, *what would she think?*

Unfortunately though, she *had* seen it, and here I was now, stuck in the medicine den.

I sighed to myself, exasperated and frustrated. *If I keep going on with these training sessions in the Dark Forest, who knows how often I'll be sitting in this den?*

Apparently my sigh had carried over to where Jayfeather was now back to his herbs. He turned his head and faced me with his blind eyes. "Sigh louder, why don't you?" he muttered, turning back to his herbs.

"Sorry," I meowed, adjusting myself, trying to get more comfortable in my nest.

"Sorry for what, exactly?" Jayfeather asked, turning his head again with eyes narrowed.

What in the name of StarClan are you talking about, mouse-brain? I asked in my head, but not daring asking it out loud. But I did ask, "...What do you mean?"

Does he really *know something?*

Jayfeather slowly started to walk towards me, his tail twitching slightly. "What do *you* mean, flea-brain? You know what I'm talking about."

I slowly began to sink down in my nest, suddenly intimidated by Jayfeather and his words.

I'm busted.

Before I could give him any sort of response, he went on, sitting down, "I'm not going to stop you from training in the Dark Forest," he began, "You clearly are very intent on doing it. You tried to hide this injury, and I see-" He cut himself off and then continued, "It seems like it's on your mind a lot."

I looked down to the ground of the medicine den, not daring to make eye contact with the gray tabby tom. *Is it that obvious?* I wondered.

"You're making a big mistake," Jayfeather said, almost at a whisper. "But you're clearly as stubborn as badger fighting for its den. I'm just going to let you deal with the consequences."

I couldn't help but let my eyes widen at Jayfeather's strong words.

I have no idea what to say. He knows what I am doing. How?

Jayfeather almost seemed to know that I was going to question him, turning away from me and back to his herbs once again. "Get some sleep," he murmured. "If you want to appear as if you're *not* getting battered every night, you need to take it easy and let your wounds heal."

I lied my head down in my nest, still in shock. *Jayfeather* does *know that I'm training in the Dark Forest*, I thought. I curled up into a little ball, trying to get comfortable again despite my wounds. *Does it matter though? He didn't try and stop me, and I'm receiving great training anyway. I don't even understand what could be wrong with doing this.*

Deep in my thoughts, my eyes finally were able to close, and darkness surrounded me.

I opened my eyes to find myself in the same clearing that I had woken up in every night. I stood up quickly, beginning to brace myself for the tough night ahead.

Who cares if I get a scratch here or there while I'm training here? If anything, I'll just look tougher to other cats! I thought. *I'd rather not have attention brought to my wounds though, if possible.*

I hissed to myself as I remembered how Cherrykit had visibly freaked out over my flank wound, making it so much more than it actually was. *I wouldn't have even had to go to the medicine den if it wasn't for her!* I thought, barring my teeth. *She deserved the scorn I gave her.*

I then widened my eyes and shook my head, realizing how crazy I sounded, for once. *Cherrykit is really nice, and a good friend. She may be a mouse-brain with a big mouth, but she was only worried.*

Before I could think about anything else, I heard an alarmingly loud growl come from behind me, "You idiot!"

I let out a small squeal of fear and then turned to face the cat that had spoken to me. It was Tigerstar. It had already been apparent in his voice, but he looked incredibly angry. "Discovered by a *blind* medicine cat? Could you have made yourself any more obvious?"

My eyes widened in disbelief. In my shock, I didn't even realizing who I was about to talk back to, "What was I supposed to do? Ashfur practically ripped my flank apart last night! I tried to hide it the best I could!"

"Obviously if that piece of *foxdung* of a medicine cat discovered what you were up to, then it wasn't good enough!" I heard Ashfur's voice, and I looked to Tigerstar's side to see that Ashfur was emerging from the bushes and into the clearing.

I let out a sigh of exasperation, not knowing how else to defend myself anymore. *You mouse-brain!* I said to myself, *They're right. I could've prevented all of this from happening.*

I looked up from where I had been staring at the ground to see that Tigerstar and Ashfur were now looking at each other with smirks on their faces. Then they both turned their gazes to look at me.

"Nevermind that, anymore, Swiftkit," Tigerstar said, speaking with

intent. "You clearly have taken a lot from these training sessions, but I can tell that with all you are learning in so little time, they are becoming hard to handle."

"-and hide," Ashfur added, muttering while rolling his eyes.

Tigerstar gave Ashfur a small hiss and then looked back at me. "We are going to put your sessions on hold for a few sunrises."

My eyes widened and my claws dug into the ground. *What?*

Ashfur then came in. "That is because we have another task for you. We wouldn't want to overwhelm you with both training and your new, *important* task."

Important task? I thought excitedly. *Wow!*

Tigerstar then looked from side to side and then took some steps forward towards me, as if he was going to tell me a secret. Ashfur quickly padded up to stand beside him.

"There is a fox lurking on ThunderClan currently," Tigerstar began, "So far, no cat has dared get in its way, but we think you would be the perfect cat to get it off of your territory."

I could barely believe what I was hearing. "Are you kidding?" I exclaimed, not even realizing how weak I might sound by questioning Tigerstar, "How would I, a kit, be most capable of fighting off a fox?"

Ashfur cut in once again. "How wouldn't you? You have received excellent training from the two of us. That's all you'll need!"

I tilted my head and narrowed my eyes. "Are you sure?" I asked, still incredibly uncertain.

Tigerstar nodded. "Surer than sure."

Before I could express my uncertainty anymore, I noticed that all of the trees and bushes around me were starting to fade away to nothing.

"Hm, it seems that you are waking a little earlier today," Ashfur commented. "Do as your were told, and if you succeed, imagine the kind of training we can give you if we see you are capable of this."

Ashfur's words echoed in my ears as my eyes opened to see the empty medicine den, besides Jayfeather, who was curled up in his nest.

Just by glancing outside for a heartbeat, I could tell that it was barely dawn, and I saw Brambleclaw, having emerged from the warriors den to stand under the Highledge, ready to organize patrols.

I narrowed my eyes, deep in thought about the meeting I had just had. I was supposed to go out and confront a fox. All by myself.

Ashfur's words stuck in my mind. *Imagine the kind of training we can give you if we see you are capable of this.*

Thinking of his words suddenly gave me a surge of determination. There was no way I was going to back out of this mission.

As quietly as I could, watching Jayfeather to make sure that I wouldn't wake him up as I moved, I stood up and slowly walked towards the entrance to the medicine den. I peeked out to see that Brambleclaw was not facing where I was, and was doing a quick grooming of his fur. I looked to my left to see that Lilypetal was still on guard by the camp entrance, but if I was quick enough, she wouldn't notice me escaping the camp.

I looked both ways again, and then stealthily padded through camp, scanning my surroundings to make sure that no cat was seeing me. I headed for the entrance to the dirtplace.

Luckily, I was able to walk swiftly. Jayfeather's healing herbs were already starting to work.

Or maybe my name is just that fitting, I joked to myself.

Glancing one last time around camp to make sure I wasn't being seen, I leaped out of sight and followed the trail up towards the dirtplace. Then, eventually, I just began to wander out into the

forest.

I have no idea where I'm going, I realized to myself, *but I am not going to fail in this task. What would happen to me then? I'm not that weak.*

My mind swirling, I hesitantly wandered deeper into the forest.

Chapter 12

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

My eyes opened slowly to see that it was nearly dawn. I lashed my tail, stretched, and let out a huge yawn. I turned my head down to my empty nest, and remembered that Swiftkit had not slept next to me, for he was still in the medicine den. I hated not having Swiftkit sleeping next to me in the nursery, but Jayfeather had insisted that I give him some space while he rests instead of being in hysterics in front of him constantly.

It's crazy, I thought, *I was never such an anxious cat until I had a kit!*

I let out another yawn before leaving the nursery, deciding that I may as well go outside and watch the patrols be assigned. Brambleclaw was already under the Highledge, directing cats as they approached him. He gave me a quick nod in greeting as I settled down near where he was.

"Miss patrolling?" he asked me as soon as he had sent out the dawn patrol. "I could send you on a hunting patrol if you want to get out for a little bit?"

I smiled at Brambleclaw, appreciating the kind offer, but I had to decline. "Thank you, Brambleclaw, but I think I should stay in camp while Swiftkit is recovering."

There is no way in StarClan that I am going to leave him while he's in there, in pain.

Brambleclaw blinked at me in understanding and then continued on with his duties. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Pippy and Dusty emerging from the apprentices' den, where they had been sleeping since they had arrived in the Clan. I turned my head to them and gave them a smile.

"Hello!" Pippy exclaimed, running up to me, touching her nose to mine. Dusty looked down at his paws and then up at me, then saying shyly but kindly, "Hi, Goldenshine." I nodded to him as he walked up to join Pippy and me.

"How did you all sleep?" I asked them, genuinely curious.

Pippy stretched out and then answered, "Wonderfully! I never would've imagined that sleeping under the stars would be so nice!"

I tilted my head at her. "Nicer than sleeping in a Twoleg bed?" I asked, narrowing my eyes and smirking.

Pippy then hesitated. "Well, I don't know about that yet!"

Dusty rolled his eyes at her and puffed out his chest. "Last night was probably the best sleep I've ever had!" he answered.

Pippy nudged her brother. "Huh, really? That's funny." Then she spoke to him in a quieter voice that I think only Dusty was supposed to hear, but I did anyway, "You seemed to spend half the night talking about how awesome Goldenshine is!"

I froze as I overheard this, trying to hide my smile. *Dusty talks about me?*

Dusty's eyes widened and he batted his sister over the face with a sheathed paw. "Hush!" he hissed quietly. Then he spoke in a louder voice. I could tell he was trying very hard to think of a way to explain himself. "Honestly, who knows what I was talking about? Pippy barely listens to me half of the time."

"Hey!" Pippy exclaimed, nudging her brother again.

I shook my head slowly at them and let out a purr of amusement. I was still in shock at what Pippy had said though, and my heart was beating so loudly I thought for sure the two kittypets would hear. My stomach felt as if it was full of butterflies.

I was brought out of my thoughts though when I saw Firestar emerge from his den, with Sandstorm close behind. His ears perked up as soon as he saw Pippy and Dusty. "You two! Just who I was

coming out to find!" Firestar leaped off of the Highledge and walked up to the three of us.

"I have been meaning to check in with you two to see where you stand with ThunderClan," he began. He then nodded to Dusty. "I know you seemed pretty intent on staying. Is this still what you want?"

My stomach almost seemed to flip upside down, for some reason, as Firestar had asked Dusty the question. Maybe I was worried that for some reason he would say no.

I'd actually be really, really sad if Dusty were to go back, I realized. *He's such a great cat, and even though we haven't known each other long, we've had so much fun together.*

I shook my head quickly and watched as Dusty looked around the ThunderClan camp and all of the cats in it. His eyes seemed to rest a little longer on me, but then he finally turned his gaze back to Firestar. "Yes, this is what I want."

Firestar dipped his head at Dusty. "Then ThunderClan will welcome you."

Hopefully, I thought to myself. I knew that cats like Thornclaw or Dustpelt wouldn't be too happy.

Firestar then turned to look at Pippy. "Now you, I know were unsure. You almost returned with Smudge, but then decided to stay!" he recalled. "You've had a few sunrises, how do you feel now?"

I turned to see Pippy nodding slowly as she stared at the ground. After a few heartbeats, she sighed and then she looked at me. "Should I stay?" she asked me.

I was appalled, but also honored that she wanted my opinion. *There's nothing I can do for her, though*. "It's completely your choice, Pippy," I answered her. *But I know that she would love it here. She's already fitting in so well! She definitely has the spirit that I had as I grew up in ThunderClan.*

Coming to this conclusion, I gave Dusty a smirk and then looked back to Pippy. Teasingly, I said, "I have to say though, your brother isn't making a bad choice at all!" Then I winked at her.

Pippy smiled at me and then looked back to the ground, seemingly returning to her thoughts. Even though her head was to the ground, I could barely see a smile forming on her face. She finally looked back up to Firestar, her eyes sparkling. "I would be glad to join ThunderClan. Thank you so much for having me!"

Firestar nodded to her. "Of course. ThunderClan could use some high-spirited cats like you two. We'll be glad to have you!" Then he seemed to be pulled into his thoughts. "You both have already been exposed to what could be seen as some training..." he said, half to himself, "But giving you each a mentor and training officially as apprentices might be more beneficial to you."

Pippy and Dusty looked at each other, their eyes glittering with excitement. Firestar nodded to the two of them and then leaped up onto the Highledge. "All cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the Highledge for a Clan meeting!"

Quickly, cats began to emerge from their dens. Though most of the warriors had already been up and getting to work, the last of them left the den at Firestar's words, yawning and stretching. Mousefur emerged from the elders den, and Poppyfrost came out of the nursery with Cherrykit, Molekit and Snowkit close behind. Lilypetal settled herself next to me, touching her nose to my ear. I nuzzled my nose into her neck briefly.

As soon as every cat was settled, Firestar began speaking again. "As I am sure you all are aware of by now, two kittypets have been staying in our Clan. They originally came to visit, but have now decided that they want to join the Clan."

Surprisingly, there was very little protest, of course there were the usually grunts from cats such as Dustpelt or Spiderleg, but neither of them said a word.

Firestar continued. "They will be training as apprentices would." He then looked down to the now former-kittypets. "Step forward, you

two."

Pippy and Dusty let out little *mrrows* of excitement before doing as Firestar had told them. Once they had settled under the Highledge, Firestar leaped down to meet them.

"You two are now officially ThunderClan apprentices!" Firestar stated. "Dusty," he meowed, turning to the gray tom, "Your mentor will be Mousewhisker."

Mousewhisker's eyes widened, but then he smiled and walked up to Dusty, touching his nose to his.

Firestar then turned to Pippy. "Your mentor will be Hazeltail."

Hazeltail immediately lightened up as she heard her own name. She trotted up excitedly to Pippy and then touched her nose to hers.

Those were great choices, I realized. *Mousewhisker and Hazeltail both came from the horseplace and weren't clanborn either. They'll have a lot of patience with them!*

Before the Clan could even cheer for Pippy and Dusty, Jayfeather's hiss carried all the way from the medicine den. As if he could see, Jayfeather burst out of the medicine den and stood before ThunderClan.

"Swiftkit is gone!" he exclaimed. "I just woke up, and his scent was stale, and his nest was empty."

My heart felt as if it had dropped to the core of the earth. I didn't even know what to think. I tried my best to stay calm, even at the prospect at my son possibly being missing.

Still though, I wasn't completely thinking straight, and asked Jayfeather, "Well, you can't even see, so are you sure he's not lingering in there somewhere?"

Jayfeather barred his teeth and hissed, "Sometimes you forget that I have other senses, Goldenshine. Those senses are telling me that that dark-gray furball is not in the medicine den!"

Firestar looked out to his Clan. "Has anyone else seen Swiftkit since moonhigh?"

Cats either shrugged or shook their heads. My claws dug into the earth. I was growing more and more anxious with every heartbeat that passed by.

Firestar nodded and then meowed, "Then we must set up a search at once!" Firestar glanced over all of the cats and then began to list off some, "Goldenshine, Lilypetal, Mousewhisker and Dusty. Go out into ThunderClan territory and see if you can catch Swiftkit's scent."

I nodded as the other cats that Firestar had called emerged behind me. Without any more words, we all bolted out into the forest, our mouths gaping to try and catch a scent.

Great StarClan, please let us find him! I was trying very hard to push back images of either a dead Swiftkit, or possibly no images of Swiftkit to be seen again.

I attempted to focus on just catching his scent. Being the one who was with him the most, I caught it easily. My ears perked up in the air. "I've got it!" I exclaimed, breathlessly.

I took the lead as I began to follow my son's scent. Behind me, the rest of the patrol was scanning our surroundings. After following the scent a bit more, I found that it took me to the dirtplace.

I tilted my head. *Possibly he came to make dirt and got a little distracted?* That would have been the best possible scenario for me to think about.

"It looks like he may have snuck out through the dirtplace tunnel," Mousewhisker meowed, sniffing around closer to where ThunderClan camp was.

"I agree," I said to Mousewhisker, nodding to him. "Let's see where he went from here."

I began to follow Swiftkit's scent beyond the dirtplace, going deeper into the forest.

"This is all my fault," Lilypetal suddenly said. "I am so sorry, Goldenshine. I was on guard last night. I should have seen him escape."

I lifted my head from where I had been sniffing, Though I was extremely worried and upset that Swiftkit had managed to get away, I knew that blaming others, let alone my own mother, wouldn't solve things. I put my tail on Lilypetal's shoulder. "It's okay. And it's *not* your fault."

"Swiftkit clearly was very methodical in his escape, and thought very hard about how he was going to get out of camp without being seen," Dusty agreed. I smiled at him in gratitude. I was impressed at how he already seemed to be thinking like a Clan cat.

I continued to follow Swiftkit's scent, my hopes rising as I realized that his scent was getting stronger and stronger. Lilypetal, Mousewhisker and Dusty seemed to realize this too, and begin sniffing around in the area.

As I was sniffing around in some shrubs, I felt a light tap on my shoulder, and I turned around to see Dusty next to me. Before I could say anything, he put his tail back on my shoulder and looked at me with a tender gaze that made my heart skip a beat.

"Don't worry, Goldenshine. We'll find Swifkit," he meowed to me softly. I smiled at him and touched my nose to his, drinking in his comforting scent before returning to my search. My heart become incredibly uneasy again as I caught another strong scent that was mingled with Swiftkit's.

Fox.

A small shudder ran down my spine, and my heart seemed to beat at double the speed. I couldn't bear to imagine finding Swiftkit's little dead body at the feet of a ferocious fox.

Lashing my tail with anxiety, I sniffed around some more. I think that the rest of the patrol had caught the fox scent as well, because all of their fur seemed to slowly begin to bristle and rise.

Just as his scent seemed stronger than ever, I heard Lilypetal let out a gasp. My ears flicked up and I bolted to stand by her side.

I could barely process the scene that was in front of me.

There was Swiftkit, cringing back up against a large oak tree. His flank wound was reopened, but he also had a couple of new injuries along his fur.

In front of him was a large, tawny-colored fox.

Chapter 13

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

A growl slowly began to rise in my throat as I saw the fox slowly start to approach Swiftkit again. It was clear he had already inflicted some damage.

But I'm not going to let him lay one more hair on my son!

Just as I was about to pursue the large, lean creature, it leaped at Swiftkit again, its jaws wide open. Swiftkit let out a fearful squeak, too much in shock to move. I let out a battle cry and leaped out at the fox, claws unsheathed.

I landed onto its back and raked my claws into its flank as hard as I could. It let out a screech, clearly in pain. It thrust its head back, and from that I was able to see that it had managed to get Swiftkit in its mouth.

I gasped at this sight, but from that I was only able to gain more fire. I reached forward to claw at the fox's neck. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the other cats on the patrol batting at the fox the best they could.

"Let go of me, you mange-pelt!" I heard Swiftkit yowl weakly, still being thrown around in the fox's mouth as it tried to manage being attacked and holding its grip on Swiftkit.

Suddenly, I was thrown off of the fox. I seemed to fly in the air for a heartbeat, and then my back slammed into a tree. My breath was knocked from me, and I fell to the ground, panting. I looked up to see that the fox was now facing Lilypetal, Mousewhisker and Dusty, Swiftkit still in its mouth. It let out a growl, and its teeth went tighter around Swiftkit. He let out another weak squeak.

As I was finally able to stand up, I heard Dusty hiss fiercely and

then leap straight at the fox. My heartbeat doubled its pace. *What is he doing? Does he even know how to fight a creature like this?* I ran up to stand by Lilypetal and screamed, "Dusty, no!"

Either he didn't hear, or he didn't listen, for he didn't turn back from what he was doing. My mouth dropped as he managed to bowl over the fox. Swiftkit flew from the fox's mouth and landed into some shrubs. I immediately ran over to meet him as quickly as I could. I licked him profusely and wrapped my tail around him.

That fox is not going to get anywhere near him again!

Seeing the way that Dusty was fighting made me feel even more sure of myself. Dusty was quick and swift as the fox snapped and lashed its claws at him. Lilypetal and Mousewhisker were right behind him, backing him up.

Finally, Dusty had given the fox enough wounds to get the tawny creature to give up. After Dusty raked the fox's flank one last time, the fox wriggled away and then pelted out into the forest, whimpering. Dusty stood in the same place, breathing heavily.

There was silence for a few heartbeats as every cat recollected themselves. Then, Lilypetal lashed her tail and turned to Dusty. "Wow, that was amazing!" she exclaimed, nudging Dusty's shoulder with her tail. I stood up and walked towards the other cats, picking Swiftkit up as I did this.

Dusty shyly looked to the ground as I approached. "Eh, it was nothing at all!" he began, humbly, "Foxes would come around the house every once in a while, and *someone* would have to fight them off!"

I stared admiringly at Dusty as he explained himself. *Wow, he's going to be such a great warrior. I can see it already.*

Lost in my thoughts, I hadn't even realized that my gaze hadn't left Dusty. His head turn towards me and his gaze caught mine. His eyes almost seemed to glimmer with shock for a heartbeat as he realized I had been staring at him. Then a sweet smile emerged on his face.

Suddenly, my ears grew extremely hot and my eyes went down to Swiftkit, where I had put him down. *What am I doing, letting myself get caught up with Dusty right now? Swiftkit was just attacked by a fox!*

I picked Swiftkit up in my mouth again and began to bolt towards camp. Through my full mouth, I meowed, "We have to Swiftkit to Jayfeather immediately! Let's go!"

Every cat nodded in agreement and followed behind me as I ran through the forest as fast as I could. Frustration was gradually starting to bubble up inside of me as I began to process what had just happened, and what had been happening over the past moon.

Foxdung! What's next? Swiftkit might as well live in the medicine den until he becomes a warrior! I was still so confused as to how Swiftkit managed to get hurt and get himself into trouble so often. He had managed to sneak out by himself and be attacked by a fox, and he had woken up every once in a while with mysterious injuries.

Is this maybe not the first time he's snuck out? I wondered. *If so, why?*

I shook my head quickly. *Who knows? All that matters right now is getting him back to camp.*

Swiftkit, still in my mouth, sighed and muttered, "Great StarClan, Goldenshine, I'm fine! You don't need to carry me."

I rolled my eyes. "Nice try. I'm not buying those words ever again!"

I heard Swiftkit sigh in frustration.

You're not the only one who's frustrated. I said to myself. *Oh, the scolding you'll get once Jayfeather gets a hold of you!*

Finally our patrol arrived back in camp and ran through the entrance. I immediately heard sighs of relief and cats calling out Swiftkit's name. Some cats started to ask questions to me, but I left them for the other cats on the patrol to answer. I needed to get Swiftkit to the medicine den as quickly as possible.

Before I even got to the den, Jayfeather peeked out, his nose up in the air. He turned towards me. "Swiftkit is back?" he asked in

disbelief. "Where did you find him?"

I put Swiftkit down and shook my head slowly. "It's a long story that I will recap once you get working on him!"

Jayfeather snorted and then beckoned us inside the medicine den. Swiftkit and I walked through the entrance, and I watched as Swiftkit slowly padded over to his same nest he had been tended on before. He exhaustedly let himself fall down in the nest as Jayfeather walked over to him with some cobweb.

I sighed as Jayfeather started to dab the cobweb on Swiftkit's wounds. *This better be the last time that he is in the medicine den for a while,* I thought. *I can't let this happen again. I'm never letting him out of my sight.*

For some reason, right after I made this commitment in my head, I heard Jayfeather quietly snort. I narrowed my eyes at him but I didn't say anything. *He's probably amused at the fact that a mother could let this happen.*

Jayfeather shook his head slowly as he continued with the cobweb. "You idiot! What were you doing out there to get this many injuries?"

I finally decided to explain the situation to Jayfeather - how Swiftkit had snuck through the dirtplace, wandered through the forest and had found the fox, who had given Swiftkit a few scratches to remember it by.

Jayfeather snorted again. "Stupid kit," he muttered half to himself. He bent his head down and sniffed the injuries more closely.

"You're lucky," he commented, "That fox gave you a lot of scratches, but they're not deep."

I let out a loud sigh of relief. *Thank StarClan!*

Swiftkit rolled his eyes and let his head drop down on his nest. "So, what does that mean?" he asked. "How much longer will I have to be in here? I don't want to be here all of the time!"

"You should've thought about that before you went chasing after a fox!" Jayfeather snapped.

My eyes narrowed at him. Had he just *accused* Swiftkit of going out of camp to look for a fox? *Or does Jayfeather somehow know something that I don't?*

I shook the thought away, realizing that some lecturing needed to be done at the moment.

"The next time you'll be in the medicine den is when your mother claws your eyes out because you snuck out again!" I scolded to Swiftkit. "Don't like that idea?" I asked, sarcastically, "Then don't do this again!"

Swiftkit didn't say anything, and only sighed in exasperation. *Hopefully being attacked by a fox is enough for him to learn for next time.*

I still wondered though why Jayfeather had assumed that Swiftkit was purposely going after a fox. How would Jayfeather assume that Swiftkit knew that a fox was out there?

I continued to watch Jayfeather with narrowed eyes as Dusty walked into the den. "Hi," he meowed, smiling at me. Then he looked to where Jayfeather was caring for Swiftkit. "How is he?"

I wrapped my tail around my paws as Dusty walked up to sit beside me. "Jayfeather said that he will be fine," I explained. "None of the cuts are deep!"

Dusty let out a sigh of relief as I had when I had been told the same report. "That's wonderful! Thank StarClan!" he meowed. I let out a quiet purr of amusement as I thought about how Dusty and I had had the same thought process in that moment.

Dusty then tried to meet my gaze. "Well, how are you?" he asked in a voice that made my heart skip a beat.

I sighed and met his gaze, giving him a weak smile. "I'm okay, as long as I know that Swiftkit is."

I heard Swiftkit snort at this comment.

Dusty then touched his nose to my cheek. "He'll be just fine," he reassured me. In a softer voice, he then said, "He's lucky that he has a mother as awesome as you to keep him safe and look after him."

I shook my head slowly as he said this. "But I *didn't* keep him safe!" I whimpered, "I let him sneak out of camp, and he got hurt!"

Dusty then ran his tail along my flank to try and calm me down. "As we've established, this wasn't your fault, or *anyone's* fault," he meowed to me, still softly. "Like I said earlier, Swiftkit clearly tried the best he could to make sure he wasn't seen, and he succeeded."

I nodded to show Dusty that I was listening, but I was still overcome with guilt. I lied my head on Dusty's shoulder as a gesture to show my appreciation for his support. Also, I was just exhausted.

"Thank you, Dusty," I whispered to him. "And thank you for fighting off that fox!"

I lifted my head up as I asked him, "Were you scared at all?"

Dusty immediately shook his head, and jokingly began to feign overconfidence, "Nah, I may as well have leaped at a kit. It was nothing!"

I let out a purr of amusement and laid my head back on Dusty's shoulder.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Lilypetal enter the medicine den. Her gaze looked overcome with relief as she saw Swiftkit being cared for.

She then turned to Dusty and nodded to him to get his attention. "Firestar wanted to see you and Mousewhisker," she told him. "He's very impressed with how you confronted the fox!"

Dusty's mouth dropped as he stood up.

"No way!" he exclaimed. He turned back to me and then touched his nose to mine. "I'll see you later, Goldenshine," he meowed.

He began to walk out of the den, and then stopped and turned his head back to me.

"Everything will be alright," he mouthed to me before leaving the den.

My ears grew hot and I tried to suppress a huge smile as Lilypetal came to sit beside me. She shook her head slowly as she watched Dusty go. "Now *that* is something special," she meowed, nudging me.

I looked at her with narrow eyes, knowing what she was getting at. "Yeah, yeah," I murmured, rolling my eyes and smiling.

Being my mother, Lilypetal knew that her teasing me about a tom wasn't going to get her far from how bashful and shy I was being, so she turned to look at Jayfeather and asked him, "So, Swiftkit will be okay?"

Jayfeather nodded, and then sarcastically said, "If he can manage to stay in camp, for sure!"

Lilypetal purred in amusement and then looked at me.

"Frustrating, isn't it?" she asked me, narrowing her eyes with a smirk.

I narrowed my eyes back at her. "What is?"

"Your own kit sneaking out of camp - isn't it frustrating?"

I tilted my head at Lilypetal, my eyes still narrowed. "What are you getting at?" I asked her.

Lilypetal shook her head slowly and then looked up, almost as if being pulled back into old memories. "Are you forgetting when you and Snowflight snuck out of the camp as kits?" she began, "Thornclaw and I had gone out looking for Ashfur, and you decided that it would be heroic to come and find us."

"Stupid furballs," I heard Jayfeather mutter, but I knew he couldn't have been completely serious, as I don't think he would ever think

to call Snowflight such a name.

I then smiled, suddenly remembering what Lilypetal was talking about. "Oh, yeah!" I meowed. "I'm sure if Snowflight were still here, she'd still be holding a bit of a grudge!"

A chill then ran down my spine, realizing what I had just said wasn't a completely outrageous idea. Jayfeather seemed to catch this too, as I saw his blind eyes close for a few heartbeats before returning to Swiftkit.

I pushed away the thought and then returned to what Lilypetal and I had been talking about. Now that I was a mother, I could totally sympathize with what Lilypetal must have felt when both of her daughters left camp, especially when at the time Ashfur had still been lingering through the forest.

I suddenly felt a pang of guilt. "You must've been so scared and frustrated," I realized out loud. I then looked down to the ground and said shyly, "I suppose it's too late to say sorry?"

Lilypetal let out another purr of amusement and then touched her nose to my ear. "It's okay. It's rare that a kit doesn't form a mind of its own and not decide to sneak out of camp," she explained, "They grow out of it."

Lilypetal then wrapped her tail around my back. "They grow out of it," she repeated, "And become the best warriors that their mother could imagine."

I suddenly felt overwhelmed with love for my mother, and I nuzzled my nose into her neck fur.

After a few heartbeats, Lilypetal then said, "It's almost moonhigh. If I don't go to sleep now, I won't have any energy to go on patrols or check up on you and Swiftkit tomorrow!" she joked. "Good night," she murmured, touching her nose to mine briefly.

"Good night," I said back as I pulled away and Lilypetal left the den.

I watched her go and then turned back to look at Swiftkit, who was starting to dose off.

Lilypetal is right. I realized. *Swiftkit will easily grow out of this. Every kit gets caught up in some shenanigans every once in a while. He'll be just fine.*

Then, suddenly, my mind went back to the fox attack, then Swiftkit and the big gash along his flank, and then his tired eyes that never seemed to go away. These images filled me with anxiety.

He'll be just fine. I repeated in my mind to reassure myself.

Won't he?

Chapter 14

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

As I walked over to the warriors den, absolutely exhausted, I reflected on the most recent happenings in my life.

Thank StarClan that Swiftkit is okay, I thought to myself, *but what in Silverpelt made him decide that escaping camp was a good idea, especially since he had been recovering in the medicine den before he left?*

I was suddenly overcome with guilt. I had already apologized to Goldenshine profusely, but I still felt terrible that I had been on guard at the time Swiftkit had supposedly snuck out of camp. I tried to push the guilt away as I crawled into the warriors den.

Thornclaw wasn't in our usual nest yet. *He's probably doing a later patrol,* I realized as I lied down and tried to get comfortable.

I put my head down on the soft moss and watched the moon slowly rise up in the midst of Silverpelt. I then closed my eyes and began to drown in my own thoughts, not being able to fall asleep just yet.

As the Swiftkit situation left my mind, my head then filled with ease and comfort. *Besides the situation with Swiftkit and his little squabble, the Clan and the rest of the lake seem to be at peace,* I realized.

It was true. There hadn't seemed to have been any conflicts at all within ThunderClan or with the other Clans at all lately. We were letting each other be, which honestly seemed rare to me.

And, now that Ashfur was dead, I didn't have to worry about his treachery anymore. Unfortunately, it had to happen at the cost of Snowflight, but I was thankful that he now couldn't do more harm to Squirrelflight, anyone of her kin, or myself or anyone of my kin.

I suddenly felt a nervous pang in my stomach. *Right?* I then felt a strong sense of foreboding. I wasn't sure why.

Trying to shake off my nervous feelings, I adjusted myself to a more comfortable position in my nest and tried to let sleep overcome me.

Just as darkness seemed to capture me, my eyes opened again. I found myself in a dark, shadowy forest. The earth under me was wet and muddy. Tall trees hovered over the clearing I was in, and bramble bushes seemed to surround me.

Is this StarClan? I asked myself. *If so, they sure do need to relocate.*

I started to wander around the area, gaping my mouth to see if I could catch any other scents.

For some reason, I felt my fur start to bristle, and tension seemed to surround me.

If this is StarClan, why is it making me so nervous? I asked myself. A realization then shot into my mind.

This is the Dark Forest.

I continued forward. Just as a cat's stench flooded through my nostrils, I heard the shudder of bushes behind me.

I quickly unsheathed my claws and turned on the cat who was emerging from the bushes.

My heart seemed to drop to the floor as I immediately recognized who it was.

This gray tom with dark patches was a sight that I never thought that I would have to see again.

I had no words. I didn't know if I wanted to sink down to the ground and wail, or throw myself at him and shred his fur off.

Rather than either of these things, I found myself slowly starting to back away. I suppose my unconscious mind was reminded of all that this cat had done to me, my friends, and my kin.

You threatened Squirrelflight, attempted to murder Firestar, Jayfeather, Lionblaze and Hollyleaf... you killed my daughter, and I'm sure would've killed the other if you'd gotten the chance.

I felt a growl begin to rise in my throat, my teeth barring as well.

To my surprise, Ashfur let out a purr of amusement.

I dug my unsheathed claws into the earth. "You sick fox-heart!" I spat at him. "What could possibly be so funny?"

Ashfur purred again and then shook his head slowly and looked to the ground. "I just love how I've managed to intimidate you so much after all of this time," he meowed, smirking, "After all of the damage I've done, I finally have you cowering in fear!"

I lashed my tail and then managed to recollect myself. *There is no way I'm letting this piece of fox-dung believe that I'm scared of him.*

"Whatever. What else could you possibly want with me if you've supposedly done so much damage already?" I challenged him.

Ashfur licked his paw and ran it across his head. It was so tempting to just want to bowl him over and rip his throat out, but obviously I thought better of it.

"I thought that I might as well show you what I've been up to lately," Ashfur answered, "Considering you seem to be so comfortable with things right now."

I rolled my eyes. *What a creep,* I thought, rage bubbling up inside of me. *But creep doesn't even begin to describe him, that horrible piece of-*

"Almost too comfortable," Ashfur murmured, interrupting my thoughts. I blinked at him, wondering what he meant.

"I see you've been lingering around in your kittypet roots recently," Ashfur taunted, answering my thoughts, "I'm not surprised, you've always been weak."

I shook my head quickly and growled. "Like I'd ever go back to a Twoleg nest!" I snapped back, but then held myself back from

saying anything else. *He's trying to rile me up again by saying that.*

I tried to move the subject. "What is this you're trying to 'update' me on?" I asked, rolling my eyes again and barring my teeth. "The more we stand here, the more I want to rip you apart!"

I guess I must have looked somewhat intimidating, as Ashfur had taken a step back.

"Steady there, Lilypetal," he teased, a smirk emerging on his face again. He then turned his back to me and began to crawl through some brambles. He stopped and turned his head back to me. "Follow me," he muttered.

Making sure to keep my distance from him, I followed. I had no idea what he was leading me to. I kept in mind that this might be a sort of trap, but if there was a chance that I could find out something that he was plotting, I would take it.

He killed Snowflight, I reminded myself. *My own daughter. I'm willing to take this risk for her sake.*

Ashfur picked up the pace in front of me, and I continued to follow him, staying at least a couple of fox-lengths behind him.

I came to a halt as I saw that ahead of me, Ashfur was now stopped, crouching down and seeming to be watching something from behind some bushes.

I narrowed my eyes and only took a couple of steps towards him. He lashed his tail to beckon me to come closer.

I snorted. "Yeah, right," I muttered, "Nice try."

Ashfur hissed at me. "Mouse-brain! At least get a little closer!"

I hissed back at him and crouched down in some bushes just a fox-length from Ashfur. He turned his head towards me and nodded it beyond the bushes.

My head shot to that direction, and I crawled a bit deeper into the brambles so I could clearly see what Ashfur was gesturing to. While

doing this, I made sure to have one eye on the gray furball the whole time, as he could do anything to me at any moment.

Through the bushes, I saw two shapes in action. One was a smaller cat, and the other was a large, muscular one.

Trying to not let myself be seen, I crawled in a bit deeper so I could actually see who was beyond the bushes, rather than just going off of shapes.

My heart stopped as I began to process the scene in front of me.

There was Swiftkit in a small clearing. He was intently watching the cat in front of him. This cat almost looked identical to Brambleclaw, but he was bigger and had scars all over his body.

Tigerstar, I realized, a chill running down my spine.

I began shaking at the sight. What was Swiftkit doing here, training with the most dangerous cat known to the Clans?

Ashfur seemed to hear my thoughts, and let out a small chuckle. "Quite a sight, isn't it?" he meowed. "This kit, who I know is your kin and Goldenshine's son, has been training here for a couple of moons..."

My mouth dropped. *No way!*

"Swiftkit has been training with Tigerstar in the Dark Forest?" I whispered, making sure that Swiftkit wouldn't hear me.

Ashfur's eyes narrowed. "Not just Swiftkit has been training him," he answered.

My eyes widened, and another growl rose in my throat. "You!" I spat at him. "What are you doing to him? I have to get him out of here!" Just as I was about to jump out of the bushes, I felt large claws dig into my flank. I barred my teeth, trying to withhold the pain.

"Not over my dead body," Ashfur hissed.

I snorted. "It's too bad that I never got to witness that," I murmured, pulling away from him as quickly as I could.

Ashfur spat at me, then meowed with his teeth barred, "Swiftkit is the center of my plan," he explained, "And there's no way I'm letting you get in the way of it right now!"

I dug my claws into the earth in frustration, but then realized my advantage. "All I have to do is tell him, or have Goldenshine tell him to stop training here!" I meowed, reassuring myself. "He's a smart kit, he'll listen."

Ashfur let out a *mrrow* of laughter. "See, Lilypetal, that can't happen."

"Why not?"

"Because, if you say a word to him, he's dead."

I couldn't suppress a gasp. It had seemed like forever ago since I had last received such a threat from Ashfur, and now all of those feelings of anger and fear were being brought back.

"You..." I growled, barely being able to get the words out, "You terrible piece of-"

Ashfur cut me off, clearly amused, "-crowfood. Yes, I've heard that many times."

Just as I thought I couldn't take it anymore, and was going to leap at the fox-heart, all of the forest around me started to disappear.

"Time for you to go back, I suppose," Ashfur murmured, giving me that terrible smirk one last time. "Have a great rest, and remember what I said..."

Before I could give Ashfur one last spitting remark, everything around me went dark, and then I opened my eyes to find myself back in the warriors den. I was breathless, and I realized almost immediately that I was shuddering. I couldn't believe what I had just witnessed. I was so filled with fear for Swiftkit, infuriated at Ashfur, and so exasperated that I couldn't do anything about his

threats.

I lifted my head up and turned it to see that Thornclaw was now next to me, also awake, staring at me with deep concern.

"Lilypetal, what's wrong?" he whispered, his voice sounding slightly fearful, "Are you okay?"

I shook my head quickly. "No," I answered quickly.

Still in hysterics, I managed to explain to Thornclaw what had happened in a quiet voice, being aware of the other cats around me who were sleeping.

Thornclaw's eyes had widened as I told him. He then looked to the ground, seeming to be deep in thought. I briefly saw his eyes cloud with guilt, as I knew that he himself trained in the Dark Forest. As uncomfortable and worried as it made me, I let him continue, because I trusted that he wouldn't let himself go too far. I was trying my best in this moment not to challenge his choices again, as seeing Ashfur's plan made me question the Dark Forest's true motives.

"I can't believe this," he finally said.

"You have no idea," I whispered, snorting.

"One thing I definitely didn't have any idea of is the fact that Swiftkit is training in the Dark Forest," Thornclaw meowed, sounding exasperated, "I haven't run into him once, and Tigerstar and Ashfur are always everywhere, so I wouldn't know as to whether they've been taking time with Swiftkit or not."

I nodded, still in shock at the situation.

Thornclaw then looked at me thoughtfully. "Are you sure it wasn't just a really bad dream?"

I tilted my head, my heart's pace beginning to slow. *I hadn't even thought of that!*

Thornclaw continued. "Everyone has been negatively affected by

Ashfur, but if anyone, you've had it the worst. What if your mind just formed a horrible dream?" he asked me, "Ashfur, Swiftkit training with Tigerstar, the threat..."

I let out a deep sigh, almost feeling lighter at the thought of it all being a dream. "One can only hope," I meowed, my voice slightly shaking.

Thornclaw also let out a sigh. "If by any chance that this wasn't just any dream, I'll keep an eye out for Swiftkit and make sure that he is safe. That's all that can be done right now."

Then he shook his head quickly. "If he *is* there training, I have to admit, I don't think it's a good idea for a cat so young to be there."

"You're telling me!" I muttered.

Thornclaw then blinked at me and then pulled me closer to him with his paw. "Let's just assume for now that it was a nightmare," he concluded, "If a bigger threat emerges, or if we clearly see that Swiftkit is in danger, we'll do something about it."

I nodded to him, then I let my head dig into Thornclaw's chest fur as I closed my eyes for the second time that night.

For some reason, I couldn't be completely assured by Thornclaw's words. As much as I wanted to believe that it had all been a dream, everything that I had just experienced felt so real - everything I felt, heard and saw.

Not being able to bear thinking about all of it much longer, I sent a prayer to StarClan, hoping that Swiftkit was safe.

StarClan, please let it have been an awful dream...

Finally, I let myself drift off into sleep once again.

Chapter 15

[image]

Swiftkit's POV

I was shifting from side to side in my nest in the medicine den as the sun slowly began to rise up in the sky and the stars slowly started to fade away.

It was the dawn after my fox attack yesterday. I had been in the medicine den all night, and I was exhausted.

But what's new?

I felt as if I had only slept for a couple of heartbeats, but I wasn't able to go back to sleep. My wounds were practically killing me, and I was also overwhelmed with frustration that I had failed in my mission.

The situation was still picture-perfect in my mind, and I felt a heaviness inside of me as it replayed each time.

After I had wandered deeper into the forest, I had managed to catch a weird scent that didn't smell like a cat at all - it was extremely strong, with a bitterness to it. I had followed it for an incredibly long time, having no idea where I was going or if I was even still within ThunderClan territory.

Eventually, out of the corner of my eye I had seen a flash of red, and I turned to see the huge fox sniffing around some shrubs.

Complete and utter terror had welled up inside of me, and I couldn't believe what I was about to do. Well, I questioned as to whether I *was* going to do it for a few heartbeats.

But then, Tigerstar's and Ashfur's words echoed in my mind once again. I was reminded of how much they were counting on me to prove myself, and show them that I was capable of anything that

they could throw at me.

So, without having given it another thought, I ran towards the fox, attempting a battle cry.

The fox had whirled around to face me, showing its teeth and letting out a bone-chilling growl.

I had frozen in fear, my claws digging inside the earth.

Before I could even process anything, the fox had leaped at me and thrown me to the side, his large claws digging into my flank. I landed on my back, sliding across the dry earth.

I attempted to get up again, but before I knew it, the fox was on top of me again. It raked its claws into my side once again.

I had let out a screech of pain, and an adrenaline rush enabled me to finally stand up and scratch my smaller claws across the fox's face.

That had seemed to bring the fox to a rage that I hadn't even seen in a cat yet. It growled again and its muzzle attempted to snap at my head. Not being able to bear the danger I felt that I was in, I turned around and attempted to run away, but I felt the fox's hot breath on my bristled tail.

I still ran though. But unfortunately, I saw that I was running straight for a tree. I knew that if I turned to either side, the fox could easily trap me.

Trying to built up more courage, I turned on the fox once again, the tree right behind me. But I immediately cowered back in fear, my bristling fur touching the tree.

That is when, thank StarClan, Goldenshine and her patrol had found me, and had saved me.

Of course, at first, I was grateful, and I knew that I would not have made it without their rescue, but not too long after, anger had begun to creep up on me. I was upset that I had needed to be rescued. How would Ashfur feel if he saw that I needed saving from

my *mother*?

Goldenshine had rushed me to the medicine den, and here I was again. All I had been thinking about was how angry I was that things had happened the way that they did, and how disappointed my Dark Forest mentors would be with me.

I'm getting a break from the Dark Forest for a few days, I realized, *but what if after a few days nothing happens? They saw that I wasn't capable of what they told me to do.*

I couldn't tell if they hadn't come to me tonight because they were giving me space for my mission, because I had barely slept, or because they were disappointed in me.

I shook my head slowly and tried to think more logically. Obviously feeling terrible about all of this wasn't doing me any good, my wounds were already doing that job.

It's over, I told myself. *And you are a kit, for StarClan's sake! You'll be able to prove yourself in so many other ways.*

I moved around in my nest so that I was facing away from the den entrance, and towards where Jayfeather was starting to stir.

Hopefully I'll be able to prove myself.

Jayfeather pulled me out of my thoughts. He padded up to me and sniffed my wounds. He let out a small huff and then walked over to his herbs.

Good morning to you, too.

As Jayfeather looked through his herbs, I heard pawsteps come from the entrance of the den. I rolled myself around to see Goldenshine entering the den. Her eyes lit up as she saw that I was awake. She padded up to sit next to me in my nest, and she bent her head down to lick my head.

In that moment I realized how much I missed sleeping with my mother by my side. I had now spent two nights in the medicine den.

It was completely my fault both times, but nevertheless, I didn't like these circumstances.

I realized with a pang that it wouldn't be too long until I was an apprentice. From there, would I ever see Goldenshine much anymore when I was training and she was going back to her warriors duties?

Suddenly feeling a little sad, I scooted closer to Goldenshine and nuzzled my head into her flank. She purred and gave me another lick on the head.

"How are you feeling this morning?" she whispered.

I nodded to her. "Better," I answered, "My flank doesn't hurt as much as it did yesterday."

Goldenshine snorted. "I would hope so, considering the wound on your flank was *fresh* yesterday!"

Goldenshine then lifted her head to look where Jayfeather was grabbing something and beginning to walk back over to my nest. "How much longer will Swiftkit need to be in here?" she asked him.

Jayfeather began to work on a poultice to put on my recovering wounds and answered, "One more night, at the most. You're lucky that you managed to create a strong and healthy kit."

I looked up to see that Goldenshine's eyes were narrowed, but she had a huge smirk on her face. "'Managed', huh?" she quoted, teasingly, "Am I not capable of creating a strong kit?"

Jayfeather threw an extra herb leaf he didn't use for his poultice in Goldenshine's direction. "Oh, please!" was all he said in response, but I saw a glint of humor in his blind eyes. Goldenshine let out a purr of amusement and tried to swipe the leaf away.

It's a good thing that Goldenshine can manage to get along with prickly Jayfeather, I realized, *otherwise being in the medicine den with the two of them would be more of a pain than it already is!*

I felt Jayfeather begin to apply the poultice to my flank wound.

"Anyway, it's a good thing that Dusty and the others saved you when they did," he meowed, while deep in concentration, "Your wounds could have been a lot worse, and they're healing quickly."

After Jayfeather had spoken, I suddenly saw him look towards the entrance to the medicine den and nod his head to someone.

"Greetings, Firestar," Jayfeather muttered.

Firestar? My eyes widened as I turned my head to see that the ThunderClan leader was indeed making his way into the medicine den. Goldenshine dipped her head to him, and Firestar returned the greeting with a friendly flick of his tail.

"Hello, Goldenshine," he meowed. Then he walked over to watch Jayfeather treating me.

"How is he doing, Jayfeather?" Firestar inquired.

"Just fine, thank StarClan!" Goldenshine answered before Jayfeather could. Jayfeather nodded to acknowledge that what Goldenshine said was correct.

Firestar smiled and gave me a very light cuff over the ear. "I'm glad," he purred. He then backed away a few pawsteps to give Jayfeather some room. I watched him, and noticed that his gaze had fallen straight on me as he traveled.

He sat down and then stared at me with his eyes narrowed.

Oh, foxdung. He's going to kick me out of the Clan, isn't he? I half-joked to myself.

Firestar then shook his head slowly. "Swiftkit, now you know that what you did was dangerous and *completely* against the warrior code, correct?" he asked, speaking evenly.

My heart sank. As much as I deserved it, I hated being lectured by the Clan leader about how I was in trouble.

I nodded slowly, not being able to meet Firestar's gaze as Goldenshine spoke, "He knows now!" She then looked down at me

with narrow eyes, "Hopefully, if he listens to his mother!"

I managed a weak smile and nodded to her.

Firestar still looked pensive. "I wonder if there should be some extra consequences for what he's done," he said, seemingly half to himself, "We don't want him doing this again!"

My heart began to beat faster. *A punishment? No!* I shouted to Firestar inside of me. *I've learned my lesson!*

I couldn't imagine how embarrassing it would be for me, as a kit, to partake in some sort of punishment. *What would Molekit, Snowkit, and Cherrykit think?*

Suprisingly, Jayfeather meowed, "If these wounds don't teach him a lesson, I don't know what will!"

Firestar nodded again.

"And Firestar, remember," Goldenshine began, "Snowflight and I did the same thing when we were kits, and you let us go punishment-free!" At mentioning my dead kin, her voice had shaken a little, but her voice was filled with amusement.

I had noticed that every time cats such as Lilypetal or Goldenshine had brought up Snowflight, Jayfeather would either pause what he was doing or take a deep breath. I thought it was weird for a while, but then I realized why it was probably happening.

Snowflight was Jayfeather's apprentice for a while. Of course he would be upset at the mention of her.

"Unfortunately, you are right, Goldenshine," Firestar muttered. Then he nodded one last time, as if coming to a conclusion.

"Alright Swiftkit, I'm going to let you go on this one," he said, sounding a little unsure. Then he went on, sounding more sure of himself, "*But*, if anything like this happens again, your apprentice ceremony could be delayed."

My eyes widened and my mouth dropped. *What? Training in the*

Dark Forest is supposed to put me at an advantage over the other kits, not delay my apprentice ceremony!

Firestar let out a purr of amusement and then padded towards the entrance to the medicine den.

"I suppose the problem that we should be addressing right now is this fox in the forest!" he declared.

I watched him go, still in disbelief. Outside, I saw that cats were beginning to stir, and the patrols were being sent out.

As Firestar walked out, he gave a nod in greeting to Lilypetal, who was emerging into the den. I tilted my head as I noticed how tense and on-edge she looked. She seemed incredibly deep in thought, and her eyes were wide open. She froze as her gaze fell on me.

What's her problem? I wondered. *She didn't look at me like that yesterday, even after she saw me with the fox.*

Lilypetal then shook her head quickly and then padded up to sit next to Goldenshine. "It looks like he's getting better," she commented to Goldenshine, but for some reason it almost seemed like she was trying to assure herself.

Goldenshine nodded with a sigh, and then laid her head on her mother's shoulder.

I was suddenly filled with warmth at the sight of this. I was personally okay with only having a mother and not a father, but every once in a while I wondered what it was like for Goldenshine not to have a mate at her side as she took care of me. I was glad that she had cats like Thornclaw and Lilypetal to stand by her side.

Then I let out a quiet snort. *And Dusty.*

I then wondered what it would be like to have a mate someday, to have kits. I then had to suppress a gag of disgust. *No way! At least not any time soon. Why would I waste my time looking for a mate when I could focus on being the best warrior I can be?*

"Hi!"

I suddenly heard a higher-pitched voice like mine come from the den entrance, and I turned my head to see Snowkit peeking her head in.

I felt Jayfeather tense beside me. I snorted and turned to him. *Scared of a kit, huh? Why don't* I *intimidate you, then?*

"Hi, Snowkit," Goldenshine meowed, her voice slightly shaking, "Shouldn't you be back in the nursery with your mother?"

Snowkit shrugged as she trotted into the medicine den. "I just wanted to check on Swiftkit!" she mewed, "We all miss you in the nursery!"

I rolled my eyes at her. "Yeah, right!" I said out loud, "They all think that I'm a rude mouse-brain!"

Snowkit's eyes flashed with sympathy, and then she shook her head. "No, they don't!" she insisted. "Molekit says that you can be a snappy furball sometimes, but that you're fun to play with!"

I held in a smile. I didn't want to show it, but hearing that the other kits missed me, and that one of them was making the effort to check on me, made me feel quite good!

A new idea seemed to spark in Snowkit's head. She hopped over to Jayfeather, who had finished treating me and was staring back at her. "Jayfeather! Can Swiftkit *please* come out and play?"

For whatever reason, Jayfeather seemed to be shocked at being directly addressed by the hyper, white furball. He didn't speak for a couple of heartbeats, and then pulled himself together, rolling his eyes.

"I don't know if he quite deserves to be out playing right now," he muttered.

I turned to see Lilypetal nodding in agreement. "True," she commented, "But he's been cooped up in this den for two days! You should let him get at least some fresh air!"

Hope sparked inside of me, and I saw Snowkit's eyes light up. She

nodded quickly and then turned towards me. She seemed to be observing my wound thoroughly.

"It has healed quickly," she murmured, "He looks like he's just fine to go out!"

The den then fell silent. Confused, I looked at every cat in the den that wasn't Snowkit. Jayfeather looked like a cat had just told him that Tigerstar had come back from the dead, Lilypetal looked confused but shocked, and Goldenshine looked absolutely bewildered.

What in the name of StarClan...? What did she say that was so outrageous?

I wondered if I had completely missed something in what Snowkit had said. Before I could give it much thought, I heard her speak again. She didn't seem to notice the other cats' astonished expressions.

"How would I know?" she muttered to herself. She then shook her head quickly. "That was weird."

She then turned back to Jayfeather, who was looking at her with wide eyes. "Please, *please* can Swiftkit come out and play?"

Jayfeather nodded his head slowly. "Y-yes. Fine, whatever..." he said, not seeming to be completely aware of what Snowkit had just said.

Snowkit let out a little excited squeal and then turned to me.

"Swiftkit, come on! Let's go!" she exclaimed, running out of the den.

Excited at the prospect of getting to play, and not even focusing on the current tension in the medicine den, I jumped up and followed Snowkit out of the den.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed that Lilypetal had followed me out. "Swiftkit?" she murmured to me. I turned to her to see that she almost looked shocked that she had spoken.

"Yeah?" I answered, tilting my head. *Probably time for another lecture.*

Lilypetal hesitated for a few heartbeats, and then took a few pawsteps towards me.

"Swiftkit... just be careful, okay?" she muttered to me.

I was struck by utter confusion, but then I realized what she probably meant.

"You mean when I go to play?" I assumed, "Don't worry, I'll try to take it easy!"

Lilypetal hesitated again, and then nodded her head. "Yes... yeah, be careful when you go play, Swiftkit," she meowed, her voice shaking slightly, before walking away.

I wondered why she seemed so nervous, but I shrugged it off as I turned back to where Snowkit was waiting for me close to the nursery.

It feels like forever since I've gotten to play! I realized as excitement bubbled up inside of me. *I've either been in the medicine den, or too tired!*

I jumped up in eagerness and ran over to where Snowkit, Molekit and Cherrykit were now beginning to pass around a mossball.

I leaped right into the game, but one of my ears flicked as I heard loud meows coming from the medicine den, and I realized that it was Goldenshine and Jayfeather having some sort of quarrel.

I let out a quiet purr of amusement. *I wonder how Goldenshine has managed to tick off Jayfeather now?*

Chapter 16

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

"Jayfeather, keep it down, or someone, including Snowkit herself, might hear us!" I hissed to the gray tabby tom.

After Snowkit had left with Swiftkit to go play, Lilypetal following close behind, Jayfeather and I had been left to process what had just happened.

Snowkit, who was only a couple of moons old, had suddenly seemed way older, observing Swiftkit's wound and seeming to know exactly *what* she was observing.

Unless Snowkit has been taking some peeks in here when she's wandering around camp, I thought, *there is no way that she would be able to look at a wound and know the difference between a fresh and a healing one.*

The first thing I did after a few heartbeats of silence was snort and shake my head slowly. "Might as well call that a small reunion," I joked, "because Snowflight might as well have been in this den a bit ago!"

That comment did not hit well with Jayfeather though, and he had immediately snapped at me. "Are you kidding me?" he hissed, "You still think this is something to joke about?"

It was then that I had tried to get him to keep his voice down and to relax, but as expected, it did not work. Jayfeather was shaking his head quickly and pacing around the den as if he could see.

"Goldenshine, I don't think you're understanding," he began.

I let out another snort. "What could I possibly not understand about this? Snowflight is reincarnated in Snowkit! If anything, that's

neat!" I meowed, trying to rationalize.

I then took a step closer to where he was pacing, speaking in a calmer voice, "I know it's hard to process. It is still difficult and weird for me sometimes."

Jayfeather suddenly sat down, not facing me. I could tell he was having trouble holding his temper.

Which isn't new, I realized. *But at least he is sensible enough to not want to make a scene.*

Jayfeather then muttered, "Goldenshine, this is not 'neat'. Far from it. When I said that I don't think you're understanding, I meant the whole purpose of Snowkit being reincarnated in the first place."

I tilted my head to the side. "Does there even need to be a purpose?" I inquired. Fighting back emotion, I added, "Snowflight was gone too soon, isn't that purpose enough?"

Jayfeather rolled his blind eyes and turned towards me. He snapped, "You could say that for *countless* amounts of cats who have gone to StarClan! But does StarClan bring them back? No!"

I narrowed my eyes. "Then what are you saying?" I wondered out loud, "Snowflight was brought back for another reason?"

Jayfeather looked up and feigned giving a proclamation, "Great StarClan, I think she's got it!"

"Hey! Give me a break!" I snapped back to him. "I don't live my life communicating with StarClan all of the time. My knowledge base is incredibly different from yours!"

Jayfeather just snorted.

I then spent a few heartbeats processing this new information. I meowed, "So, Snowflight wasn't brought back out of pity. StarClan has more plans for her?"

Jayfeather nodded, his eyes dark. He spoke more calmly, "Precisely."

That's kind of scary, I realized to myself. *I wonder what kind of plans they could have?*

Before I could ask Jayfeather out loud, I saw out of the corner of my eye, Brambleclaw entering the medicine den. His eyes glittered with amusement.

"I hear you all were having a pleasant and lovely conversation in here," he meowed sarcastically. Jayfeather just huffed and walked over to Swiftkit's nest and picked up the moss for it to be replaced.

I watched him do this and then turned to face Brambleclaw.

"Sorry about that," I murmured, licking one of my paws and drawing it over my ear, a bit embarrassed. "You know Jayfeather, all it takes is a few words and he loses his mi-"

"What do you want, Brambleclaw?" Jayfeather meowed through gritted teeth. I had let out a purr of amusement as he cut me off.

"I was wondering if you're able to come to the Gathering tonight, Jayfeather?" Brambleclaw asked. "I know Swiftkit is recovering in here, but I just saw him out playing, so is he fit enough to return to the nursery?"

My gaze went back to Jayfeather as he answered, "He's just getting some fresh air and testing the waters. He'll be back in here before moonhigh for tonight, but he should be out tomorrow."

"That's fine, then," Brambleclaw meowed, nodding. Then he looked at me. "Would you like to go?" he asked me.

My eyes widened. "But I'm a queen!" I exclaimed, "I really shouldn't leave the camp while Swiftkit is recovering from wounds."

Brambleclaw purred with amusement. "No worries! But I can tell that he has been a bit of a burden lately..." he murmured. "Are you sure you don't want to get out for a night?"

Brambleclaw's such a great deputy, I thought to myself, *he truly looks out for the well-being of his Clanmates.*

I narrowed my eyes, then thinking about this offer that Brambleclaw had given me. *I suppose if the Clan deputy thinks I should, I might as well. I trust that Jayfeather will keep an eye on Swiftkit...*

"Sure! I'll go!" I meowed, suddenly excited at the thought of getting to leave camp for a bit and go to a gathering.

The one of the previous gatherings that I had been to was the one where, immediately after it ended, I had given birth to Swiftkit. I had collapsed near the edge of the island, and Snowflight had immediately run over and helped me, Breezepelt right next to her.

Three out of the four kits I had given birth to had died. At the time I couldn't bear the grief. Firestar finding us and telling Breezepelt to leave didn't make things any better.

I then had to lie to the whole Clan, letting them believe that Mousewhisker was the father, which luckily, is what many of them still thought.

If this gathering is even half as eventful as that was, it will probably be too much for me! I joked to myself.

As I was stuck in my thoughts, I heard another cat pad into the den. I looked up to see Lilypetal standing next to Brambleclaw. He gave her a nod of greeting and then turned back to me.

"Great," he meowed, responding to my answer, "We'll be leaving at sunset."

I nodded as he left the den, leaving me, Jayfeather and Lilypetal.

"You're getting to go to the gathering?" Lilypetal asked as soon as Brambleclaw left. "That's great! As a queen too! I had to beg to go to the gathering when you were a kit!"

I purred with amusement and meowed, "Brambleclaw thinks that I should, considering how stressful things have been with Swiftkit lately."

Lilypetal snorted. "I guess you and Snowflight were too well-

behaved for me to be given that opportunity!" she joked.

I let out a mrrow of laughter as Lilypetal cuffed me over the ear. She then sat down and wrapped her tail around her paws.

"The reason I originally came in here was to see what in the name of StarClan was going on!" Lilypetal meowed. "What were you two arguing about?"

Neither Jayfeather nor I spoke. I turned back towards Jayfeather to see him lashing his tail back and forth and giving me a look that seemed to be saying, "she's *your* mother, you break it to her!"

I turned back to Lilypetal, not knowing what to say. *Do I cover for it somehow or tell her the truth?*

Lilypetal seemed to give up on getting answer as Jayfeather and I stared at her, still not saying anything. She shook her head quickly.

"Whatever, then!" she muttered. She then began to scan her eyes around the den mindlessly. "Anyway, Snowkit earlier almost made my heart skip a beat. She seems like Snowflight so much sometimes, doesn't she?"

"Great StarClan!" Jayfeather then exclaimed, rolling his eyes. Even though I knew he couldn't see it, I shot him a frowned glance.

"What? Did I say something wrong?" Lilypetal asked, her eyes widening.

I guess we're telling her, I concluded to myself. *She is my mother and Snowflight's, she deserves to know.*

I took a long, deep breath and met Lilypetal's hazel gaze. "What you say is not far from the truth..." I murmured.

I then went on to explain the whole thing to Lilypetal: reminding her of Snowflight coming to us in a dream and saying that she would "see us soon", explaining the way Snowkit had been acting, and the fact that there was no sign of her Snowflight in StarClan, according to Jayfeather.

Lilypetal listened with wide eyes the entire time. I could tell that she was overwhelmed with all of the information. I did most of the talking, but Jayfeather would cut in when he needed to.

After I finished, the den was silent for a few heartbeats. Lilypetal just stood there, shaking her head slowly.

"Wow," she finally whispered. She took a deep breath. "Wow..." she repeated.

"I know," I murmured. I observed Lilypetal's gaze as she processed the entire thing. Of course, she seemed shocked, but I also noticed a hint of her own disappointment gleaming in her eyes. There was also excitement.

Luckily she's probably almost happy at the prospect that her daughter is "back", in a way.

"I mean, I certainly suspected something from the day that Squirrelflight brought her into camp," Lilypetal meowed. "No one could mistake those striking blue eyes."

I nodded, letting out a small huff.

"And she did just come out of nowhere," Lilypetal went on. "No cat had any idea where she came from, and there's no sign of any parents anywhere near that we know of." She then nodded and muttered, "It makes sense."

"Are you doubting it?" Jayfeather suddenly snapped.

Lilypetal wasn't phased by Jayfeather's tone. "Not at all! It's just... wild," she murmured. "Thank you both for telling me."

"Sorry that we didn't tell you immediately," I said, "We could barely believe it ourselves for a while."

Lilypetal dipped her head. "No worries," she assured me. As she lifted her head back up, her eyes narrowed. "The secret is safe with me, but is it alright if Thornclaw knows too?"

"Just don't let him tell anyone else," Jayfeather muttered.

"I won't!" Lilypetal promised before leaving the den. I gave Jayfeather a quick farewell and then followed Lilypetal out of the den. I began to think through everything that had just happened.

I realized that it was almost nice to get the news of Snowkit out to another cat. It was incredibly stressful sometimes just discussing it back and forth with the most short-tempered cat in the Clan.

Now my family will be able to endure whatever this is, together.

I then went back to wondering what possibly could be the reason that Snowflight was brought back. Obviously, she had still been incredibly young, and pretty fresh out of apprenticeship when she was killed, but according to Jayfeather, it was more than that.

Whatever the reason is, I thought, *I hope that it is accomplished.*

~ ~ ~

The sun was beginning to disappear behind the trees as I padded up to the gathering ThunderClan cats, about to set out for the island.

I began to scan the crowd to see who else was going to the gathering, and I immediately lit up as I saw that both Pippy and Dusty were coming with their mentors, Hazeltail and Mousewhisker.

Their first gathering! I realized.

I trotted up excitedly towards the two former kittypets. "Your first gathering!" I repeated to them out loud, "How do you all feel?"

Pippy was the first to speak, "I can't wait! But I'm incredibly nervous. What if the other Clans don't accept us?"

I shook my head quickly. "Welcoming in kittypets as potential warriors is harder for some than others, I'll admit," I murmured. I then nudged Pippy's shoulder. "But you'll be okay! You know that my mother came into ThunderClan as a former kittypet, and heck, so did Firestar! But now they're respected among all of the Clans."

"That's true," Pippy agreed as all of the cats begin to travel into the

forest and out of camp.

"Just give it time," I went on, "If Lilypetal had gotten scared and given up on being accepted, I wouldn't be here! Don't worry."

"Thank StarClan for that!" Dusty meowed, flicking my shoulder with his tail.

As I traveled with Pippy and Dusty on each of my sides, I suddenly began to wonder what Dusty had meant with that comment. *Was he relieved that he would eventually be accepted as a Clan cat, or that I was able to be in ThunderClan because of my mother?*

I rolled my eyes. *Don't be ridiculous. Don't let a handsome tom prevent you from thinking logically!* I told myself.

After what only seemed like a few heartbeats of talking and joking around with Dusty and Pippy, ThunderClan arrived at the island.

As we crossed the fallen tree over to the island, I looked to see that both Dusty and Pippy looked apprehensive to step onto the island.

This is probably overwhelming for them, I realized. *So many new cats!*

But, as I figured, as soon as we stepped down into the grass onto the island, the two cats looked at each other, their eyes gleaming with excitement.

"Wow!" Pippy exclaimed. "How cool is this?"

"Where do we even start?" Dusty exclaimed, scanning the island quickly.

"Go on!" I meowed, purring with amusement. I nudged Dusty's shoulder and winked. "Just make sure to come get me if some stupid cat starts messing with you two!"

Dusty's gaze met mine for a single heartbeat, his eyes glittering, then he looked back to the big cluster of cats. "We will! Let's go, Pippy!"

I smiled as I watched them run off onto the island and towards the

other Clans. Immediately they seemed to connect with some young WindClan warriors.

After I made sure that these WindClan warriors weren't going to be any trouble for Pippy and Dusty, I began to walk closer to the crowd to see who I wanted to catch up with.

My heart seemed to stop as my eyes locked with a certain cat. The more my gaze stayed on those familiar amber eyes, the more I realized that I couldn't back out of this conversation now.

I let out a quiet sigh and tried to walk up to Breezepelt like I wasn't about to crumble with nerves. He gave me a weak smile as I sat a tail length in front of him.

"Hi," I murmured, looking down at the ground.

"Hi, Goldenshine," Breezepelt meowed. I could tell he was trying to meet my gaze, so I finally built up the courage to look at him again.

I hadn't spoken to Breezepelt since we had said our last goodbyes, so this obviously felt incredibly weird. I had been able to grow and move on from our time together and the situation, but I knew that the connection we had and the memories we made would never truly go away.

Looking at Breezepelt gave me such a weird feeling. The intense love I had felt for him was gone, but he still made my heart skip a beat.

"How have you been?" I asked him, trying to get more comfortable. "It's been so long!"

Breezepelt lashed his tail and then gave a single nod. "Just fine. Borders have been clear and prey is running well."

I couldn't suppress a small purr of amusement. *He's nervous too*, I realized. *"Borders have been clear and prey is running well"? Great StarClan!*

"What?" Breezepelt asked in response to my small laugh, tilting his head.

I shook my head slowly and let out a smirk. "Nothing," I meowed, still purring. "I'm glad that your borders are clear and that the prey is plentiful!"

"What's wrong with saying that?" Breezepelt asked. He sounded defensive, but there was a hint of amusement in his voice.

I let out a sigh of relief as I felt that a barrier had been broken. "Nothing!" I repeated, smiling. "How are you *really*?"

Breezepelt nodded, also seeming to be more comfortable in the conversation. "I'm fine, '*really*,'" he answered, teasingly. "How are you? How is our kit?"

I don't know why the fact that Breezepelt had brought up Swiftkit felt like a huge blow. It almost felt so surreal that the two of us shared a kit.

I've been so used to it being just me and Swiftkit. This is his father right here.

As shocking as it was though, I appreciated Breezepelt's concern. "I'm doing good!" I responded. "As for Swiftkit, he's quite the handful, but of course I love him, nevertheless!"

Breezepelt's eyes glowed as I answered him. "Swiftkit, huh? I like that a lot," he murmured. "I hope I can meet him here someday!"

I smiled and commented, "That certainly won't be for long! He'll be an apprentice before we know it!"

"Wow, already? Great StarClan."

"I can barely believe it myself!"

"What is Swiftkit like?" Breezepelt asked, seeming eager to know.

I snorted and rolled my eyes. "A lot like you, unfortunately!" I joked, "Snappy and short-tempered."

"Oh, please!" Breezepelt exclaimed.

I let out a purr of amusement and went on, "But under that he is incredibly kindhearted, and *so* smart! He's so intelligent for his age!" I almost cut myself off as I realized how much I was gushing.

It's all true though. I thought. *Breezepelt and I created a pretty amazing kit.*

"I don't doubt any of it!" Breezepelt meowed. He seemed truly impressed with my words, but I also caught a hint of sadness when he was speaking. He probably did hate the fact that he hadn't raised Swiftkit at all, and that he wouldn't ever get to see him as a young kit.

Realizing this, I briefly touched my tail tip to his shoulder. Before Breezepelt had been about to speak again, a yowl came up from the large tree where the leaders stood on for the gathering.

Breezepelt and I locked our gazes together again and I gave him a nod.

"I'll talk to you soon, Goldenshine," Breezepelt whispered before walking over to his Clan.

I smiled as he walked away, and then I padded over to where ThunderClan was gathered. I noticed that Dusty had been watching me as I traveled over. I settled next to him as the gathering began.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed that Dusty seemed very preoccupied and deep in thought. I didn't have much time to wonder about it, because I looked up at the four leaders to find a shocking sight.

Next to Firestar, Blackstar, and Onestar, was Mistyfoot, standing on her own branch. She stood proudly over the gathered cats.

Mistyfoot... Mistystar, is leader now? I asked myself. *No way! She's going to be great!*

As I started to listen to Blackstar give his Clan reports, I felt Dusty softly nudge me. I turned my head to see that his big blue gaze was filled with curiosity.

"What's up?" I whispered as quietly as I could, being mindful of the gathering going on. "Did mingling with the other cats go okay?"

Dusty nodded, smiling, his eyes lightening up at the question as he was brought back to his encounters. "It was awesome!" he whispered, "The other cats seemed so impressed with Pippy and me, and how we've managed to learn so much so quickly!"

"That's great!" I responded.

"But that's not why I nudged you," Dusty continued, looking down to the ground shyly.

He's so cute when he does that! I thought, a smile emerging on my face. "Then what did you have to tell me?"

Dusty lifted his head again to reveal his gaze, filled with curiosity once again. "It's nothing, really," he began. "I just wondered who that tom was you were talking to?"

I tilted my head as he went on, nudging me again, teasingly, "I could tell that you all have a past."

I snorted quietly and nodded. "You're not wrong!" I whispered. More hesitantly I added, "He was my mate."

Dusty's eyes widened. "No way!" he responded. "But, isn't he from another Clan?"

"Yes," I responded, the guilt I felt at falling for a cat from another Clan coming back as if it were fresh. I then proceeded to quietly explain to Dusty the whole story of Breezepelt as the gathering went on: how we met, how we had broken the warrior code to be together, and how it all ended.

Dusty listened intently, concern still filling his blue gaze, but my stomach fluttered as I noticed a hint of jealousy there. I could tell that he hated the fact that me with Breezepelt got to him, but he didn't want to hide it, either. For some reason, I was filled with excitement as I realized this.

Before Dusty could respond to what I revealed to him, we heard

Firestar speak above us, so we both looked up.

"Recently, we have welcomed two new cats into our Clan," Firestar began, "They are formerly kittypets, but have decided to fully dedicate themselves to the life of a Clan cat."

As I predicted, there were a mix of meows of protests and triumph. Firestar's eyes narrowed as he went on, "I see plenty of potential in the two of them, and I know that they are going to make fantastic warriors. We welcome Pippy and Dusty."

The gathered cats then began to chant the two former kittypets' names. I flicked Dusty on the ear as his name was called.

Firestar then dipped his head to Mistystar to show that he was done, and she began to speak. I turned back to Dusty.

"So, that's that," I whispered, bringing us back to the conversation we had been having before we were cut off. "You're one of the only cats who knows the truth, so *please* don't spread it, okay?"

Dusty's gaze warmed. "I wouldn't dream of it," he meowed tenderly. I couldn't help but smile at his kindness and gentleness.

"Sorry that I asked," he suddenly murmured, shyly. "I just... I wondered if... I didn't know-"

I tried to suppress a purr of amusement as I watched Dusty get more and more jumbled, trying to explain himself. I briefly touched my nose to his neck fur.

"I get it," I whispered. "Breezepelt and I definitely have a past, but those feelings we had for each other are *long* over, trust me. I'll always care about him, but relationships and cats grow apart."

I saw that Dusty's eyes were glowing as I pulled away, but then he looked down bashfully once again. He was silent for a few heartbeats, but then he said something that caused me to have to hold back an ecstatic squeal.

"Would it be too much for me to say that I'm glad that that's the case?" he murmured, meeting my gaze.

I looked down to the ground, attempting to hide my huge smile. I could tell that Dusty saw it though, as he was purring with quiet laughter.

"N-no... not at all," I whispered, still overwhelmed with excitement.

Before either of us could say anything else, we heard Firestar's yowl, "This Gathering is over!" and cats began to travel back towards the fallen tree to go back to their territories.

"Dusty!" I heard Pippy shout, "Race you across the tree!"

Dusty gave me one last look before running after Pippy, who was already waiting for him near the fallen oak.

I let out a sigh and began to walk alongside Mousewhisker, but then I suddenly heard my name being called behind me.

"Goldenshine, wait!"

I turned around to see Breezepelt approaching me.

"Say hi to Swiftkit for me, if you want to," he meowed, shifting his paws from side to side.

I dipped my head to Breezepelt. "Of course I want to. I will as soon as I get back!"

Before I could turn around again, Breezepelt took a step closer to me. "I also request that you do something else," he began, a smirk emerging on his face.

Great StarClan, what will this be about? I wondered. *He better not do what I think he is...*

Luckily, he didn't. Breezepelt's eyes glittered with amusement as he meowed, "Give that gray tom a break, will you?" he purred, nodding his head towards where Dusty and Pippy were beginning to race.

My eyes widened with shock. "What do you mean?" I asked him, bewildered that he had brought up Dusty.

Breezepelt snorted. "I see the way that he looks at you, and he seemed concerned when he noticed you over here talking to me..." he meowed, seeming to imply that he was trying to make a point. Breezepelt then flicked my ear with his tail. "Looks like Swiftkit may gain a father in his own Clan after all!"

"Oh, hush!" I meowed, my ears growing hot with bashfulness and embarrassment. I then looked down to the ground shyly, "I mean, that would be nice..."

Breezepelt let out another purr of amusement before glancing over to where WindClan was beginning to travel across the log. He then looked back to me.

"I have to go," he meowed. He then leaned in closer and whispered, "Remember what I said!" before running over to walk beside Heathertail.

I was filled with a strange warmth as I watched Breezepelt go. It was so weird that we had managed to reconnect and talk to each other like old friends so quickly, let alone talk about another tom together, despite the two of *us* at one time being together ourselves.

I wasn't complaining, though. I was overwhelmed with relief that we *could* talk about that kind of stuff together, like me taking interest in another tom, without any tension. I was overcome with satisfaction as I rejoined Mousewhisker and the rest of ThunderClan.

Breezepelt and I managed to become friends tonight, I thought, *and... someone else that I'm friends with currently may be heading in the opposite direction...*

Chapter 17

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

Pippy and Dusty flashed beside me as I was about to step onto the tree bridge, on the way with the rest of ThunderClan to return to our territory.

As I stepped onto soft earth once again, I fell back to pad beside Squirrelflight and Leafpool. As much as I wanted to talk and catch up with them, I was drowning in my own inner thoughts, and I felt like I wouldn't be able to get a word out without sounding jumbled.

So much was on my mind at the moment. I had barely been able to pay attention to the gathering at all.

Ever since Jayfeather and Goldenshine had given me the outrageous news that Snowkit was Snowflight, I had delved into thoughts about this, and just how incredibly out of the loop I had been with things lately.

Not only had I missed what was going on with Snowflight, but I had had no idea that Swiftkit might potentially be in danger.

It still might be just a dream though... I realized to myself. *Nevertheless, I've been so caught up in my past lately that my dedication as a warrior is faltering!* Although having encounters with Smudge and the former kittypets had been lovely, I needed to pull back from my kittypet roots and go back to being the best warrior that I could be.

I even let a silly kittypet get Thornclaw worried! Great StarClan...

I made a decision right then and there that I need to put all of my past behind me. Firestar had done it, Cloudtail had done it, and even Daisy. I could as well.

As ThunderClan began to travel through their own territory, I took a relieved deep breath, and I began to converse with Squirrelflight and Leafpool, finally. They were able to lift my spirits even more. I always enjoyed talking to two of my oldest friends in this Clan.

Finally, ThunderClan arrived to the Clan entrance, and cats, exhausted, began to crawl through to go to their dens for the night.

I then tilted my head in confusion as I suddenly heard alarmed yowls of curiosity and protest. I gave Leafpool a worried look and then ran ahead to see what was going on.

I crawled through the camp tunnel to see many cats facing Jerry, who was standing near the Highledge, not seeming intimated at all.

What in the name of StarClan could he be doing here? I already knew that this tom being in ThunderClan camp couldn't possibly bring anything good.

I saw Dusty and Pippy finally trot up to the dark ginger tom and touch noses with him. As I watched this, I felt a muscular flank rub past me, and I saw that Thornclaw had nudged his way through the crowd to face Jerry.

"What are you doing here?" he growled through gritted teeth.

I cringed back, knowing that Thornclaw already had something against Jerry. I was already praying to StarClan that this wasn't going to turn into a huge squabble between my mate and some kittypet.

Firestar, who was already at the front of the group of cats, raised his tail to silence Thornclaw and then took a step closer to Jerry.

"Although I don't want to rip your fur off," Firestar began, giving Thornclaw a warning but concerned look, "I would also like to know what you are doing in our camp."

Jerry quickly glanced at me, and then faced Firestar, putting the tip of his tail on Pippy's shoulder. "Smudge had wanted to stop by, because he was still waiting on Pippy's word as to whether or not she wanted to become a Clan cat," Jerry began. He glanced at me

once more before he spoke again, "I saved him a trip and came in his place."

As Jerry kept shooting me quick glances, I saw that other cats were beginning to notice. They would glance back at me, either narrowing their eyes or staring in concern.

Finally, when I didn't think I could take this awkwardness any longer, Dusty spoke for Pippy, "She has decided to stay in the Clan! Isn't that right, Pippy?"

Pippy nodded definitively. "Yeah! I'm a Clan apprentice now, Jerry!" she meowed, while hopping up and down excitedly.

Jerry nodded slowly. "I see," he meowed, his eyes glittering with admiration and amusement. He then gave a nod to Firestar and then began to pad back towards the camp entrance, ignoring all of the cats staring in indignation, and *still* glancing over at me every few heartbeats.

Thornclaw's scent flooded through my nose as I suddenly felt him standing beside me, almost out of protectiveness and defensiveness. He wrapped his tail around my back.

"I suppose I should head back and begin to enjoy a significantly quieter house," he commented as he stopped at the tunnel, his eyes scanning the camp and then resting on me. "Perhaps someone else would like to come and join me?"

My mouth dropped. *He did* not *just do that!*

Many eyes turned to face me as Jerry, very clearly, stared right at me.

"Lilypetal?" some cat exclaimed.

"Why her?" some other cat asked.

"What do you mean? She was a kittypet a bit ago! What if she's been sneaking off with this cat?" someone else snapped.

My teeth clenched together at this remark, and my head began to

swipe around to try to catch who had said that. But, after a few heartbeats I shook it off and faced Jerry.

As I took a deep breath, I took a glance at Thornclaw, who had growled when cats began to accuse me, but I could tell he was wanting to leap at Jerry at any moment.

I dug my claws into the ground as I spoke. "First off, I have done no such thing," I hissed to the Clan. "If you all truly know me, you would understand that already."

"Yeah! Lilypetal would never betray her Clan!" Squirrelflight yowled, padding up to stand next to me.

Goldenshine piped in, "My mother is the most loyal ThunderClan cat I know!

After these comments, Thornclaw nodded and took a step closer to my side. "Jerry, I suggest you leave, and I'd prefer if you don't take my *mate* with you, thank you very much," he muttered.

Thank goodness that Thornclaw's jealously isn't getting the best of him right now, I realized.

Unfortunately, I had thought that too soon. Jerry took a step closer to where I was. "I suppose that's true..." he meowed with a smirk on his face. "But I'm confused, Lilypetal... when we walked back to your border together, you talked about how sometimes you wish you could just leave it all and come live with Smudge and me?"

My eyes widened and I couldn't suppress a hiss. *He just* completely *made that up!*

Many cats began to yowl and hiss in disbelief, but the cat that I heard among the others was Thornclaw, exclaiming, "*What?*"

I shook my head quickly and looked to everyone in the Clan. "That's not true! Don't believe him!" I yowled. I then turned to face Thornclaw, whose eyes were blazing with anger and hurt. "He's lying! *Please* listen to me!"

"Why would he lie about that?" Thornclaw breathed, his voice

shaking.

I rolled my eyes and began to rip at the earth with my claws in frustration. "I don't know!" I meowed in exasperation. "You said yourself you thought he had feelings for me! Maybe he's using that as a means to get me to go with him!"

My mind was spiraling. I suddenly felt like my place in the Clan and my relationships with some Clan cats, including Thornclaw's, were at stake. I was trying to think of every possible thing I could say that could convince him and everyone else that Jerry's words were nothing but a load of mouse droppings.

I took another exasperated breath and stomped up to Jerry, my fur bristling. "You know that is not true, Jerry. Stop lying, stop padding after me, and *stop* trying to take away what's important to me," I hissed, knowing quite well that my words were going to sound rash, but I didn't care. "Leave, before I have to do it myself."

Jerry's eyes narrowed. "I wouldn't be completely opposed to that..." he meowed teasingly.

Ugh! This tom doesn't have any sort of filter, does he?

Trying my hardest not to shred him to bits, I bared my teeth and meowed sharply. "*Leave*. now."

Jerry, still seeming unaffected by any sort of aggression, gave me one last smirk before beginning to crawl through the camp entrance and out into the forest. "Goodbye, Lilypetal. I'm sure this isn't goodbye," he murmured as he went out of sight.

I watched him go, making sure that he was gone, and then proceeded to turn to face the Clan, who still seemed in disbelief. To my luck, a good amount of them just looked annoyed.

Hopefully that's because Jerry is an annoying piece of crowfood, I thought, *not because one of their Clanmates is potentially a traitor...*

"Please don't believe what that kittypet said," I pleaded to the Clan, so worried that they wouldn't trust me anymore. "I have no idea what he was talking about. Yes, he led me back to the ThunderClan

border after escorting Smudge, but I never, *ever*, said anything along the lines of wanting to leave the Clan to become a kittypet, or to be with *him*."

I scanned through the listening cats, trying to get a sense of what they were thinking. I couldn't suppress a whimper of complete distress. "*Please* believe me!"

I saw Squirrelflight's eyes glittering with sympathy, and she padded up to stand next to me. "I believe you, Lilypetal, no doubt!" she exclaimed.

"Me too," Brambleclaw meowed, dipping his head to me.

"Me too," Leafpool agreed.

"Me too," my mother, Mistpelt, meowed.

"So do I," I heard Graystripe meow near the back of the crowd. "I'm sure that tom would have said that he was the king of the squirrels if it meant that Lilypetal would consider going with him."

I let out a huff of relief as I heard many cats purr with amusement and murmur in agreement. Not to my surprise, there were a couple of cats, such as Spiderleg and Dustpelt who still seemed unsure, but if they were, they stayed quiet.

"That Jerry has always been a troublemaker," Pippy commented, shaking her head slowly. "For once, he didn't have the wrong idea of wanting to pad after a cat like Lilypetal, but they way he's handling it is, as usual, obnoxious and too far!"

There were more murmurs of agreement as Dusty meowed with humor in his voice, "You've got that right! I have to say, I'm not too sad at the thought that I might never see him again!"

Finally, the situation seemed to blow over as cats gave me apologetic and sympathetic nods as they traveled to their dens. I noticed that Thornclaw hadn't moved. He was shaking his head slowly as he stared at the ground.

I'll definitely need to talk with him, I realized. But, as I was just about

to travel over to him, my eyes caught Firestar's, who had watched the whole scene unfold in silence.

I hesitantly padded over to him, feeling overwhelmed with shame and guilt that my Clan leader had had to watch my loyalty be questioned.

I gave Firestar a nod as I sat down in front of him. "I'm so sorry, Firestar," I began, "I'm so sorry that he came here and caused all of that trouble. I am loyal, I promise!"

Firestar let out a faint purr of amusement as I spoke. He then dipped his head to me. "I never doubted it, Lilypetal," he meowed as I let out a sigh of relief. "I watched you as you grew up in this Clan. I have never once questioned your loyalty, not even when you first arrived in the Clan. I sensed your determination and spirit, and as you trained and breezed through your apprenticeship, I knew that you were here to stay."

I suddenly felt overwhelmed with gratitude as Firestar spoke. It felt awesome to be spoken so well of by the Clan leader, and also to know that he never questioned my loyalty at all.

"Thank you," I meowed, then taking a deep breath. "Thank you," I repeated.

Firestar smiled and then nodded his head towards the warriors den. "Of course. Now, go get some sleep, Lilypetal," he commanded softly. "Just sleep this whole night off. It'll be blown over soon."

I nodded to Firestar before beginning to travel to the warriors den. Thornclaw had disappeared from the camp clearing, so I assumed that he had gone inside to sleep and blow off steam.

I crawled through the den entrance, feeling incredibly apprehensive. I was almost worried that Thornclaw wouldn't be in there, and if he was, that he would ignore me or not want to be near me.

I let out a sigh of relief as I saw him lying down in his nest, with a bit of space next to him.

Hopefully that's where he's expecting me to sleep, I thought.

Hesitantly, I padded over to the nest and lied down next to Thornclaw. Luckily, he didn't move or pull away, he just stared straight ahead.

I knew immediately that I had to make things right. "Thornclaw, I am so sorry," I whispered to him, lightly rubbing my tail along his flank. "As I've said before, if you know me well, you should know that I would never consider leaving you or this Clan."

Thornclaw just let out a sigh. I shook my head as I went on. "How would leaving benefit me in any way, huh? Why would I do that when I have this amazing Clan to fight for, my friends, Goldenshine, and *you*!"

Thornclaw was still silent. I rolled my eyes in frustration and flicked one of his ears with my tail. "Fine. Have fun getting angry over *lies* that a stupid tom said about your mate," I muttered, giving up on trying to talk to him any more tonight. "I'm going to sleep."

Before I could even set my head all the way down, Thornclaw lifted his head and spoke. "Fine, fine, Lilypetal!" he whispered, seeming taken aback that I was giving up, and was desperately trying to get my attention again. "I'm sorry that I've been silent..."

I nodded, waiting for him to go on.

His voice shaking, Thornclaw meowed, "Jerry's words may have been lies, but my initial fears told me that they were true. I...I couldn't even fathom the fact that you would even consider leaving."

I smiled and touched my nose to his ear. "You know it would be the same for me if I were in that position," I pointed out to him.

I pulled away, seeing Thornclaw's eyes sparkling. "I know," he whispered. "And I know that everything you said to speak for yourself out there was true. I'm sorry if it looked like I was doubting it."

"It's okay," I murmured, my gaze burning into his. "I was just so

scared that you were angry with me!"

Of course, a huge part of me thought that that was a completely outrageous thing to think, but in tough situations, you typically go to the worse case scenario.

To my surprise, Thornclaw then let out a snort and purr of amusement. He lied his head down back in his nest as he spoke again, teasing, "Lilypetal, hopefully when I say things such as 'I love you more than you'll ever know', you understand that, loving you that much, should cause me to think completely outrageously when any challenge revolving around you comes my way?"

I looked warmly at him. "I love you too," I meowed. "But what do you mean?"

Thornclaw lifted his head back up to look at me. "To be honest, Lilypetal, before I met you, I never even imagined being able to find a mate. It was never on my mind, and I never seemed to be able to find that connection," he explained, "But then I met you. I fell in love with you. I was blown away by your determination and your kindness. We had kits together and have endured so much together."

This is all incredibly sweet and I can barely take it, I thought as I was overwhelmed with love, *but I wonder what his point is?*

I wrapped my tail around his back as Thornclaw continued, almost seeming to have read my thoughts, "My point is... I don't know what I would do without you. Yes, I get jealous, I over-analyze things, and I get protective of you... but that's just because I am so glad that you're in my life."

I looked down to the ground, feeling like I was about to explode with love. Thornclaw wasn't the softest of cats, only with me at times. So, getting to see him so vulnerable and raw touched my heart in ways that I couldn't even imagine.

I dug my head into his chest. "I am so glad that you're in my life too, Thornclaw," I whispered to him. "I know that everything you do is with the best interests of me and the Clan."

I then pulled away to meet his pale blue gaze. "Let's put this whole night behind us," I pleaded softly, touching my nose to his. "Goodnight. I love you."

Thornclaw held my gaze for a few heartbeats, his eyes sparkling, before whispering, "Goodnight. I love you too."

I scooted closer to the warmth of Thornclaw's fur before lowering my head and closing my eyes. I felt Thornclaw touch his muzzle to my head before lying down himself.

As crazy as tonight had been, luckily I was able to go to sleep tonight peacefully. Or, at least I thought.

Even despite the talk I had just had with Thornclaw and seeing that the Clan still trusted my loyalty, a terrible sense of foreboding still tugged at my heart. As I had just realized earlier today, so many things were going on within even just ThunderClan that could be a cause for worry.

Attempting to shake those worries away for the night, I took a deep breath and let sleep take over me, *finally*.

Chapter 18

[image]

Swiftkit's POV

I let out a screech of determination as I leaped in front of Snowkit and batted the moss ball out of the reach of her paws. I dove head-first into the ground and then rolled over, my back against the dry earth.

Cherrykit and Molekit let out purrs of amusement as Snowkit padded over to me and swiped her paw over my ear.

"Mouse-brain!" she exclaimed, pretending to be angry, "I *so* had that!"

"Then why did *I* catch it?" I teased to Snowkit, smirking.

"Whatever!" Snowkit purred, rolling her eyes.

My mouth gaped open into a yawn as Snowkit batted the mossball over to Molekit.

It had been quite the day, but it had all gone in my favor!

After Jayfeather and Goldenshine had allowed me to go out and play for a while, Jayfeather had called me back into the medicine den once ThunderClan had left for the gathering. He checked my wounds one more time, and told me that I was fine to go back to the nursery!

Thank StarClan for letting my wounds heal quickly! Jayfeather had originally thought I'd have to stay in the medicine den another night!

Also, luckily, I had been out in the open to witness the conflict that had happened after ThunderClan had gotten back from the gathering.

That dumb kittypet, I thought. *Poor Lilypetal. It must have been really*

scary to have her loyalty questioned...

I then felt a pang in my stomach as I thought about this. *What if more cats found out that I was training in the Dark Forest?* I wondered. *They would hammer me as much as Lilypetal.*

I was interrupted from my thoughts when suddenly my eyes were overtaken by a flash of green, and I suddenly found myself spitting bits of moss out of my mouth. I shook my head quickly and then focused to see that Snowkit, Cherrykit and Molekit were howling with laughter, rolling around on the ground.

"Who's the moss ball champion now?" Snowkit meowed in triumph as she stood up, lashing her tail.

Just as I was about to leap into a play-fight with Snowkit, my nose was filled with the familiar scent of my mother, and I felt Goldenshine touch her muzzle to my head.

"As much as I'm sure you want to shred Snowkit to bits," Goldenshine murmured, "I think it's about time you went to sleep!"

Me, along with the other kits, let out groans of disappointment. I *was* exhausted, not that that was necessarily a surprise, but it felt as if me and the other kits had been playing for only a few heartbeats. I wanted to play for all of eternity!

"Aw, come on, kits!" Goldenshine meowed. "You have another day waiting for you, tomorrow!"

I nodded. *Goldenshine's right!* I thought. *We can play* all day *tomorrow!*

As the other kits began to trot into the nursery, I quickly followed behind, trying to catch up to Snowkit. She narrowed her eyes and smirked at me as I caught up to her.

"Goldenshine is right," I meowed to her out loud, teasingly. "Tomorrow, I'll gather all of the mossballs I can find, and I'll throw them *all* in *your* face!"

Snowkit let out a purr of amusement. "Not if I do it first!" she

purred. I lightly cuffed Snowkit over the face with a sheathed paw before padding over to Goldenshine in her nest.

Before I was able to settle down, Cherrykit passed by. She seemed to be observing my flank.

"It looks like your wounds are all better!" she pointed out, excitedly. "Are you *feeling* better?"

I tried not to show my annoyance. *You had to bring that up?* I thought. *Why is she so worried? I've been playing mossball with her since sunhigh!*

I took a deep breath and nodded to Cherrykit, trying not to snap at her. She was a nice cat. I had no reason to want to hurt her feelings.

I nodded to her and mewed, "Jayfeather says that it's all better!"

Cherrykit's eyes glowed. "Yay! That's great!" she exclaimed, hopping up in the air. Then she composed herself and dipped her head to me. "Goodnight!" she whispered. "Goodnight, Goldenshine!" she then meowed to my mother.

"Goodnight, darling," Goldenshine whispered, giving Cherrykit a quick lick on her head.

I was watching Cherrykit pad over to Poppyfrost to join Molekit and Snowkit as Goldenshine meowed, "Did you have a good day?"

I immediately nodded and looked up to her. "It was awesome!" I answered. "...and awesome to be out of the medicine den for once."

Goldenshine snorted. "You have no idea!" she murmured. She then touched her nose to my ear before lying her head down in her nest.

My ears flicked as I heard her speak again. "Is that why you seem so much lighter today?"

I tilted my head and looked at her. "What do you mean?"

Goldenshine lifted her head back up. "I don't know... since you've been out and about today, you've just seemed so much more like

yourself," she explained, "Not the tired, grumpy Swiftkit I've seen in here for the past couple of moons!"

I nodded as I thought about what Goldenshine had just said, and I had to admit that she was right.

After the fox attack, things had really been looking up. I had felt more rested, I haven't wanted to snap at every cat that talked to me, and I had gotten to enjoy playing, and not fighting to the death every night.

...Is this maybe because I haven't been in the Dark Forest for the past few nights? I realized.

I still hadn't seen Ashfur or Tigerstar since they had given me the mission to find the fox. They had told me that they were giving me a few days to fulfill the mission... but I hadn't. I still wondered what this meant when it came to my training in the Dark Forest.

What if they just gave up on me? I wondered. I was shocked when I didn't feel completely disappointed at that prospect.

Honestly, the idea of not going to the Dark Forest for maybe *one* more night... was a pleasant one.

I finally answered to Goldenshine with a nod. "You're right, I guess!" I purred, nuzzling my head into her fur before laying it down into the soft moss.

"I'm glad," Goldenshine whispered before lowering her head and closing her gray eyes.

I took a deep, relieving breath and then closed my eyes.

I was annoyed to find that they opened right back up again, but I wasn't back in the nursery. Rather, I recognized the tall oak trees and the multitude of bushes of the Dark Forest.

Are you kidding me? Foxdung! I thought to myself. *Just when I thought I was going to get another good night of sleep!*

I couldn't suppress a small hiss. I was digging my claws into the

earth in frustration as I heard pawsteps come from behind me.

"Oh! I'm *sorry*," I heard a familiar deep voice meow, mockingly. "Did we interrupt your night of curling up with your mother and getting your beauty sleep?"

I whirled around, eyes wide, to see Ashfur and Tigerstar approaching me.

I only responded to Ashfur with another hiss. I suddenly felt like I couldn't show any of what I had been thinking - not missing the Dark Forest - to them at all.

They would think I was practically a weak newborn kit!

"Welcome back," Tigerstar meowed, just behind Ashfur.

I sat down and looked down to the ground. "You're here to make me feel even worse about not getting the fox, right?"

Ashfur and Tigerstar looked at each other and back to me. I tried not to back away as I saw both of their eyes filled with malice. I tried to ignore it.

"That is in the past, Swiftkit," Tigerstar commented. "You are only a *kit*, after all."

I wish you had realized that before *you sent me on that mission*, I thought to myself.

"As tough and *warrior-like* it would have made you look," Ashfur began, me having felt a small pang of regret as Ashfur had said "warrior-like", "Tigerstar and I realized that we clearly have so much more to teach you. We couldn't keep you away for one more night!"

But what about my sleep? I thought bitterly.

Tigerstar, almost seeming to have read my thoughts, barked at me, "If you thought you were going to start having great rest, think again!"

He gave me an inquiring look as he continued, "Sure, you're exhausted all of the time now, but how do you think all of this training at night will pay off in the end?"

I narrowed my eyes. *He is right...*

Tigerstar began to walk back and forth. "Exhaustion is worth what you'll become one day."

Those works echoed in my mind once more. *Exhaustion is worth what you'll become one day...*

"So what do you say?" Ashfur asked, his eyes filled with determination. "Are you ready to take on all of the plans we have for you?"

I looked down at the ground, suddenly deep in thought. *Today has been so great. Getting a break from the Dark Forest was just what I needed*, I realized. *But... what if Tigerstar is right? Will sacrificing good days like this be worth it in the end?*

Suddenly coming to a conclusion, I gave Ashfur a definitive nod. "I am," I meowed, trying not to let my voice shake.

Ashfur dipped his head to me. "Wonderful." To my surprise, he and Tigerstar started to pad away from the clearing that we were in.

"Tonight, we want to try something different," he began. "As you probably have realized by now, we train several Clan cats here in the Dark Forest..."

"We had planned on having some group training, and we want you to join them tonight," Tigerstar continued.

My stomach suddenly felt like it was being flipped upside down. *Training with the other cats? Am I the only kit? What will they think?*

"How impressed they will be that you're only a kit!" Ashfur meowed, seeming to turn my thoughts around. Ashfur then nodded his head towards a small path covered in sticks and dead leaves. "Follow us."

Tingling with apprehension and anticipation, I nodded and then began to follow the two toms deeper into the forest. Tigerstar and Ashfur were quietly whispering to each other as we traveled.

I wonder what they're talking about? I thought. *She-cats they're padding after... what they ate last?*

Quicker than I realized we would, we arrived to another large clearing. My mouth dropped at all of the different cats I saw there.

I couldn't recognize specific Clan scents yet, but I could tell there was a bit of all four Clans here.

I didn't realize that the Dark Forest was this popular! I thought. *The Dark Forest has recruited all of these cats?*

My heart began to beat faster as I started seeing cats that I recognized... Blossomfall, Ivypaw...

My eye was suddenly drawn to a cat that I had never seen before. Despite this, I was brought to complete alertness when my gaze fell on him.

He looked almost exactly like me, except he didn't have a white chest and paws, and his eyes were a glowing amber.

I suddenly felt a pang as I realized something. *Could that possibly be... Breezepelt? My father?*

I could barely fathom this realization I had just made. *What do I do? Do I go and greet him and introduce myself as his son?*

I began to pad over to Breezepelt and then stopped, thinking better of it. *Goldenshine will introduce me to him when she wants to. Plus, he'll notice me anyway when I train here more!* He was pretty far away at the moment. I didn't think I would catch his eye, anyway.

I wonder why he's here? I then wondered to myself.

Before I could give it much thought, my heart dropped as I recognized another cat out of the corner of my eye. A certain cat that cats knew to be the male, muscular version of my mother with

pale blue eyes.

Thornclaw is here? I asked myself. *More of my kin? I can't believe it!*

I turned my head to see that Thornclaw was reflecting the shock that I was feeling.

"*Swiftkit?*" I exclaimed, then slapping his tail over his own mouth. "You *are* here?"

For some reason, Thornclaw looked as shocked as he would probably look if Firestar walked into ThunderClan camp wearing a kittypet collar saying that he missed having a soft life. *I get that I am a kit, but why is he that shocked? I'm tough! I have a right to be here!*

Suddenly, I heard footsteps come up next to me, and I turned to see the gray pelt of Ashfur beside me.

"Yes, he is here, Thornclaw," he answered. "Is that a problem?"

Thornclaw's eyes suddenly flashed with anger. "I thought that we had established that you would stay out of my fur while I'm here," Thornclaw growled through gritted teeth.

"Sure," Ashfur meowed, shrugging, "But I can't do that when you're likely to interfere with my plans, now can I?"

I just stared with wide eyes as this tense exchange went on between the two toms.

"Haven't you already done enough to my family?" Thornclaw hissed. Then he suddenly paused, a knowing look in his pale blue eyes. He seemed overwhelmed with panic as he then took a step closer to me and whispered, "Swiftkit, this is far too dangerous for you! *Get out of here!*"

My mouth opened, but no words were able to come out. I took a step back as I tried to process what Thornclaw had just told me.

Before I could respond, Ashfur took a step towards Thornclaw, unsheathing his claws. "What was that?" he taunted, causing Thornclaw to take a step back.

Thornclaw looked fearful at first, but then blinked and answered sharply, "I don't think Swiftkit should be here, and the fact that he's training with *you* doesn't make me feel any better!"

I cringed back as Ashfur lifted an unsheathed paw up. "Since when have I cared about you feeling *better*?" he hissed, slashing Thornclaw across the face.

I gasped as Ashfur leaped on top of Thornclaw. Thornclaw's surprise barely gave him time to react, despite being one of the strongest fighters in ThunderClan.

Before I even could process the fact that Ashfur had attacked my kin, I saw that Ashfur had raked his claws many times over Thornclaw's flank and belly. Thornclaw let out a yowl of pain, but managed to kick Ashfur off of him. He leaped on top of him and bit into Ashfur's shoulder.

Ashfur hissed and swiped his paw over Thornclaw's face, knocking him over to the side.

I watched in horror as Ashfur then dug his teeth into Thornclaw's throat. Thornclaw, already seeming to be covered in battle wounds, was getting weaker with each heartbeat that went by.

I couldn't suppress a whimper of distress when Ashfur suddenly dropped Thornclaw from his jaws, the golden tabby warrior falling limp to the ground.

Is he dead? I wondered, praying to StarClan that Ashfur had just given him a few nasty wounds.

I let out a quiet sigh of relief as I saw the shallow rises and falls of Thornclaw's chest. But, my hopes began to fall again as Ashfur then slashed his claws across Thornclaw's flank one more time, then pushing him forward with one of his paws. I felt like I was going to vomit at the sight.

As cats around the clearing stared in shock, Ashfur looked up from where he had been staring maliciously at Thornclaw.

"Never question what the Dark Forest has in store," he said in an

eerily quiet meow. "If you trust in what we say and do, and the plans that we have, you won't have to worry about this happening to you."

Not being able to bear at what I had witnessed any longer, I began to back away and then broke out into a run, away from the clearing.

My heart was beating faster than it ever had in my entire life. I took a large gulp as I held back vomit once more. I tried my hardest not to let my speed falter.

Thornclaw could be dead, and it's all my fault!

I let out a loud whimper of distress as the forest around me began to fade into nothingness.

Chapter 19

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

I let out a low growl of irritation as I was being interrupted from some of the best sleep I had had in moons by a paw prodding me.

Still not fully awake, I tried to push the paw away, not even knowing who it was that was prodding me. "Keep your fur on," I murmured. "I'll be up in a moment!"

"We don't have a moment!" To my surprise, I heard the angry hiss of Jayfeather.

As I started to blink my eyes open and wake up a little more, I began to realize the overwhelming scent of fear around the warriors den, and I heard the fast pacing of many cats around the den.

Suddenly becoming very alert with the weird atmosphere, I opened my eyes fully and stood up, trying to process the surroundings.

The warriors den wasn't full, but it was abundant with cats, pacing back and forth anxiously, glancing at something behind me.

What in the name of StarClan is going on?

"Finally, Lilypetal! It seemed to take forever for you to wake up!" I suddenly heard Brightheart's voice come from behind me.

But, as I turned around to face her, Brightheart and what she had to me immediately didn't matter anymore as I saw what was in front of me.

There was Thornclaw, lying on his side a few tail lengths from our nest. He was barely moving, and there were deep wounds all over him. I couldn't suppress a gasp as I saw the deep bite in his throat.

How could this have possibly *happened? Thornclaw has been next to*

me the whole night!

I didn't even know what to feel. I was overwhelmed with worry, pain, confusion, and a multitude of other things.

I couldn't move. I didn't want to move. If I moved, that meant that some cat would talk to me, and I would have to hear the horrible reality of what was probably going on.

But, I knew that I had to be practical. I turned to Jayfeather, who was over my mate applying herbs to his wound. I couldn't hide the worry and shakiness in my voice as I spoke. "Jayfeather, what is going on? What happened?"

As if my heart couldn't beat any faster, it managed to as I met the worried gaze of Jayfeather's blind eyes. I expected him to snap at me or to tell me to go away, but all he said was, "I don't know. I don't know at all."

He's just as amazed as I am, I realized. *That's definitely not a good thing.*

I quickly scanned the den to see who else was in here with me. Brightheart was at Jayfeather's side, along with Leafpool, but standing close by were Cloudtail, Brackenfur, Lionblaze, Whitewing, and Sorreltail.

"I woke up early, just as the dawn patrols were going out," Brightheart began, sounding completely distressed. "I was just about to leave the den when I saw Thornclaw. It was dark, but I could just barely see all of his wounds, and that he was barely moving, so I immediately ran to get Jayfeather."

Brightheart's words almost seemed like they were being spoken in a swarm of fog. All I could do was stare ahead at Thornclaw, sinking my claws into the ground, as the gravitas of this situation began to settle in.

Thornclaw practically looked shredded. He was barely moving. Jayfeather looked worried. *If he's not dead yet, he's going to be*, I thought as I let out a wail of grief out loud. *The love of my life is*

going to be gone! This isn't fair!

I could barely process it. We had just had a lovely moment together that felt like heartbeats ago as we had both fallen asleep in our nest. All of our talks, hunts, and amazing times together would never be repeated. I would never get to look into his breathtaking pale blue eyes or hear his voice again.

As I let out another whimper of grief, I realized that two cats were at my side, Whitewing on one and Brackenfur on the other.

"Just breath, Lilypetal," Whitewing meowed softly as she ran her tail along my flank. "Everything will be okay."

I nodded to Whitewing. *Everything will be okay, everything will be okay...* I tried to repeat in my mind over and over.

I drew in a shaky breath, attempting to compose myself, but it didn't last long. I only found myself growing more antsy.

"How is he doing? What happens now?" I asked Jayfeather, who had not looked up since he had answered my last question.

He still didn't look up. He almost seemed afraid to meet my gaze, despite not being able to see it. "What needs to happen now, is get Thornclaw to the medicine den," he muttered, half to himself. "Brackenfur, Cloudtail, carry him, please, while I go on ahead."

Brackenfur, who was still next to me, briefly touched his nose to my shoulder before quickly joining Cloudtail, who was attempting to lift up my mate.

I realized I couldn't even bear to watch anymore. I let out a hiss of exasperation and frustration and whipped my head away, my teeth clenched together. Looking at Thornclaw, unmoving, looking like he did, was impossible to see even for a heartbeat.

But, at the same time, I knew that I had to follow Brackenfur and Cloudtail to the medicine den. I had to be there for Thornclaw and see what was going on.

I touched noses with Whitewing as a gesture of appreciation and

then tried to catch up with Cloudtail and Brackenfur. As I traveled, I could hear the meows of worry and shock as cats realized what was going on. Some cats even tried to ask me questions, but all I could do was give them worried glances. I couldn't even answer them anyway, I barely knew what was going on, myself.

This literally is the most out-of-nowhere thing that has ever happened to me, I realized. *StarClan, why would you do this to me?*

With my head lowered to the ground, I finally made it to the medicine den and crawled inside. Cloudtail passed me as he was leaving. He gave me a look of sympathy and put his tail tip on my shoulder.

"Stay strong. That's what Thornclaw would want you to do," he whispered to me before leaving the den.

I watched him go, took another shaky breath, and then turned to see that Brackenfur was standing over Thornclaw, who was lying down in a new nest as Jayfeather gathered some herbs.

I nodded to Brackenfur before padding over to lie down beside Thornclaw, which I suddenly felt the the urge to do. I dug my nose into his golden fur, breathing in his scent as if it was my last time getting to do so.

It might be, I realized, but barely being able to hold the thought before wanting to push it away.

I turned to Jayfeather, who was padding over with more herbs. My eyes suddenly felt very heavy. "What is going to happen to him? Is he going to make it?" I asked, so terrified to hear the answer, but I knew I had to face it, and that Jayfeather wouldn't lie to me.

I could tell the gray tabby tom was hesitant to answer me, but after a few heartbeats, he said, "It's not likely, Lilypetal, I'm so sorry," he murmured, "But I'm going to do all that I can."

The shock of Jayfeather actually showing some form of remorse didn't really process, as that wasn't what was on my mind.

If Jayfeather says so, it's probably true, I realized. *Thornclaw is going to*

die.

At this point, I wasn't even in panic anymore. I was so weakened and numb with grief, that if a cat were to tell me that the whole of ThunderClan had left and each cat had gone their separate ways, I wouldn't have much of a reaction.

As I stared blankly ahead, with Brackenfur's tail on my back, I suddenly heard quick footsteps come from outside, and I slowly turned to see Goldenshine appear at the den with Swiftkit in her mouth.

"I heard that Thornclaw was hurt!" she exclaimed through a full mouth. Goldenshine then put down Swiftkit, who looked extremely annoyed.

"I'm almost an apprentice, Goldenshine!" Swiftkit hissed. "You didn't need to carry me."

Goldenshine ignored her kit. "What happened?" she asked, her eyes wide as she suddenly got a look at her father. All that I could do was meet her gaze and give her a weak shrug.

That seemed to answer every question Goldenshine could have had, as I saw a shudder run down her flank and she closed her eyes, seeming to be overwhelmed with emotion. I wrapped my tail around her back and let out another sigh.

I quickly glanced over to where Swiftkit was, standing near the entrance of the medicine den. It seemed that his annoyance with Goldenshine was moons behind him already. He was staring at Thornclaw, his eyes wide and clouded with fear and guilt, and he looked like he wanted to run out of the den.

I understand that he is probably grieving as well, Thornclaw is kin, I thought. *But why is he acting as panicked as I am?*

It suddenly hit me, and I almost felt as if my heart physically dropped. Looking back up at Jayfeather and seeing his dark gaze, I had a feeling that he was suspicious of something as well.

...What if the dream I had and the Ashfur's visit was *real?* I realized.

That would mean that Swiftkit really is *training in the Dark Forest.*

I shuddered as everything began to come together. *And that would mean that Ashfur's threats to me were real too. What if Thornclaw told Swiftkit that he shouldn't be there, and Ashfur did something?*

I let out a quiet growl, not loud enough for any cat in the den to hear, and dug my claws into the earth once again.

Has Ashfur harmed another cat *in my family?*

As this realization hit me, I tried my best not to show my anger and fear. As far as I knew, Goldenshine and Jayfeather didn't know that Thornclaw was training in the Dark Forest, nor Swiftkit.

Maybe Jayfeather does, considering as a medicine cat he is closely connected to StarClan, I realized. *But what about the Dark Forest?*

As I was deep in my thoughts, I didn't realize for a while that Jayfeather was calling my name, Brackenfur was leaving, and Goldenshine was standing up.

I shook my head quickly and looked at Jayfeather. "What?" I meowed weakly. I already knew that any words I would speak for the next few days would take a lot of effort to get out.

"As much as I hate to ask it," Jayfeather meowed, clearly in distress but trying to hide it, "I need everyone to leave this den while I treat Thornclaw. I can't have any distractions."

Obviously not wanting to, I shook my head quickly to Jayfeather. "I would never!" I insisted. "I am *not* leaving my mate."

Jayfeather sighed and rolled his eyes. "Lilypetal, listen" he meowed in a surprisingly gentle voice, "If there is any chance of Thornclaw living, then I need to take it. I can't do that with cats swarming the den."

All I could do was sigh and look down at Thornclaw, who was showing signs of the slightest rise and fall of his flank.

"You know what Thornclaw would be telling you if he was awake,"

Jayfeather continued. "He'd want you to not fuss over him and focus on your Clan."

Wow, even being as prickly as he is, Jayfeather can really manage to bring out his caring side as a healer and talk some sense into cats, I realized.

"Jayfeather's right," Goldenshine meowed softly as she padded over to stand by Swiftkit, who still looked incredibly shaken. "We can come to check on him later. Brambleclaw will probably need you for a patrol."

Before continuing, she nodded to Jayfeather. "I also know that if Thornclaw was able to talk to you, he'd be telling you to not let Brambleclaw down and to go on patrol."

All I did was nod in response and take one last glance at the love of my life before padding slowly to leave the den, Goldenshine and Swiftkit following closely behind.

As I was traveling through camp, my eyes met Brambleclaw's sympathetic gaze. I quickened my pace to meet Brambleclaw, and Squirrelflight who was sitting next to him.

"Lilypetal, I am so sorry," Squirrelflight meowed. "Try not to lose hope."

Brambleclaw nodded, as if to tell me to listen to Squirrelflight. "Are you up for going on a border patrol with Squirrelflight, Leafpool and me?" he asked.

As much as I wanted to say no and just curl up into a ball and think and worry, I nodded as Brambleclaw called Leafpool over.

Leafpool gave me a sympathetic nod, and then we began to travel out of camp. Brambleclaw led the way, with me following closely behind with Leafpool and Squirrelflight on each of my sides.

It was then that I realized that I was surrounded by my oldest and probably closest friends in ThunderClan.

I'm so thankful, I realized to myself. *Not much is going to make me feel*

better right now, but they'll be quite a help!

As we left camp, I took one last glance at the medicine den, a shudder running down my spine.

StarClan, be with Thornclaw, please, I prayed to them silently. *I am nowhere near ready for him to join you yet.*

Still flanking Squirrelflight and Leafpool, we all crawled through the camp entrance and followed Brambleclaw into the forest.

Chapter 20

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

I stared down at my sleeping son as rain began to pour down outside.

After Thornclaw had been taken to the medicine den, most cats in ThunderClan had attempted to begin their normal duties of the day, despite one of their Clanmates possibly dying just foxlengths away.

I could tell it was difficult for everyone, though. Thornclaw was highly respected in ThunderClan as one of its senior warriors. He was strong, determined and defiant. I had always been proud to call him my father.

I, personally, was having a very hard time, as expected. I was also incredibly confused.

I didn't understand how Thornclaw had even gotten these wounds he had in the first place, or how he could have been injured to the point of possibly going to StarClan.

My mind had been spiraling like crazy since first laying eyes on my dying father. I didn't think I'd be able to think about anything else until I was told that he'd be okay.

Did he maybe go out into the forest for a walk last night, get attacked, and then attempt to return to his nest and sleep it off? I wondered. *I don't understand how no cat saw this coming...*

As I was thinking, I felt Swiftkit squirm against my flank, and I looked down to see that he was awake, staring out into the camp that was being covered with raindrops. Cats traveling through camp cringed as they got more and more soaked and squinted their eyes against the water pelting at them.

Swiftkit, who was watching this, suddenly let out a very shaky sigh and set his head back down in our nest. I was reminded of how distressed he had seemed since Thornclaw had been in the medicine den.

He hadn't said one word at all since he had hissed at me to not carry him. He didn't seem to want to look any cat in the eye, and he looked down to the ground everywhere he went.

Poor darling, I thought to myself. *This must be affecting him more than I realize.*

I ran my tail along his flank and touched my nose to his ear. "Are you worried about Thornclaw?" I whispered to him.

To my surprise, Swiftkit didn't pull away from me at all. He simply met my gaze with his big gray eyes and nodded. "Yeah, I really am," he murmured as his eyes clouded with guilt.

Why would he feel guilty about this? I wondered. *I hope he's not blaming himself. There is literally no way that this is his fault.*

For some reason though, as I looked at Swiftkit's strong sorrowful gaze, I began to doubt that. I felt a wave of fear run through me, but I immediately tried to shake it off. *Great StarClan, how stupid am I? Swiftkit may be a little snappy, but I would never be able to comprehend any situation that would make what has happened his fault.*

Before I could analyze the look in Swiftkit's eyes any longer, he let out a long sigh and turned to look out into ThunderClan camp again, not saying anything more.

My gaze went down to my son's flank, which was beginning to look as if there had never been any wounds to begin with.

Thanks to Jayfeather! I thought. *As I always say, he's a prickly little furball, but he's a brilliant medicine cat. Swiftkit is pretty much all better!*

I shook my head quickly as Swiftkit suddenly mewed, "Goldenshine?"

"Yes?" I answered back, tilting my head. *What could this be about? I haven't done many of these deep, intellectual mother-son talks yet...*

As I stared at Swiftkit, I saw him open his mouth, as if about to say something, before closing it again, hissing and shaking his head.

Then he finally spoke, still not facing me, "Has there ever been a choice you've made that you regretted so much, that you wish you could go back in time and undo it?"

My eyes widened at the question. *Great StarClan, that is not the question I was expecting! I guess it's time for a deep, intellectual mother-son talk!* I joked to myself.

After I got over the shock of the question being asked, I began to think of the answer.

Breezepelt... I realized to myself. The cat I had fallen in love with from another Clan.

If I regretted anything I had chosen to do, it would be that very moment that I agreed to meet with Breezepelt when he asked me to. It had been so hard to say no, though, with that adorable smirk on his face and the exciting, mischievous look in his eyes.

I had began to feel intense remorse once I dealt with the consequences, such as being caught by Firestar, losing the trust of some of the cats I cared about, and having to negotiate dealing with a kit with parents in two different Clans.

I repeated my thoughts out to Swiftkit, "As much as I wish it wasn't the case," I began, "It would have to be when I decided to start meeting with your father."

I could tell this caught Swiftkit's attention, as he let out an almost inaudible gasp before looking up at me.

"Because he was from another Clan?" Swiftkit asked, tilting his head.

I nodded slowly. "I have to admit, actually being with Breezepelt didn't make me feel badly at all," I continued. "It was the

consequences after that made me realize how wrong it all was."

Swiftkit's eyes widened when I said this. "Really?" he asked, his voice shaking slightly.

What's his deal? I wondered.

"Yes," I murmured, not giving much thought to his strong reaction to what I had said. "Now I realize how naive and stupid I was, obviously. But..." I then looked down at Swiftkit, overwhelmed with love.

"But," I repeated, "But if I hadn't made those choices, you wouldn't be here with me, would you?"

A slight smile emerged on Swiftkit's face, and suddenly his fearful eyes seemed to suddenly fill with relief and love. He dug his head into my flank as he meowed, "That's true."

I licked Swiftkit's head before meowing, "So, I guess my point is, it is hard to find a choice you would truly want to undo, because your mistakes form who you are, and those dark times and mistakes always bring a bit of light later on."

I turned away from Swiftkit for a heartbeat and smirked to myself. *I don't think I'm doing too badly at this!* I realized.

I looked back to Swiftkit to see him looking incredibly thoughtful, nodding his head slowly.

"I see," he finally said. "Making mistakes forms who you are, and sometimes positive things can come out of them."

I nodded, but simultaneously letting out a purr of amusement. "But that doesn't mean that you go out looking for trouble!" I commented, flicking Swiftkit's ear with my tail.

Swiftkit snorted and also let out a small purr of amusement. "Right, right," he muttered, smiling as he turned his head to look back outside at the pouring rain.

I suddenly remembered the conversation I had had with Breezepelt

at the gathering, and what he had told me to do. "By the way, I spoke to your father when I went to the gathering," I murmured as Swiftkit turned his head back to me.

"He says hi," I meowed, winking at my son.

Swiftkit's eyes widened, wider than I had ever seen them. "Wow... really?" he exclaimed. He then looked like he wanted to say more, but he cut himself off, and simply said again, "Wow!"

I felt a wave of satisfaction run through me as this conversation Swiftkit and I had closed. Not only did I feel like I had said the right things to him, but Swiftkit was so intelligent anyway, and I knew that he would understand what I was trying to tell him, no matter what it was.

I had already verbalized this to Breezepelt, but I truly was amazed at how smart Swiftkit was. Unfortunately, he sometimes used his intelligence to his advantage, talking down to the other kits every once in a while.

But nevertheless, Swiftkit was absolutely incredible to me, and I was so proud of him. I couldn't wait to see the amazing warrior he'd become some day.

So, it hurt my heart to see him constantly so tired, preoccupied and cranky. I wished I could find out what was making him like this.

Yesterday, luckily, had been a great day, unlike the many days before that. Swiftkit had spent most of the day playing with the other kits and acting like any other young cat should. *Hopefully there will be many more days like that,* I thought.

I then looked ahead and thought about his apprenticeship. Maybe being out and about, training as an apprentice would knock him more into place?

I was pulled from my thoughts as I heard pawsteps in front of me, and I looked at the entrance to the nursery to see Dusty padding in. His eyes were warm and filled with concern. My heart immediately began to beat faster.

As if Swiftkit noticed my nerves, he looked up at me with his eyes narrowed and a big smirk on his face. I reflected the face he was making at me back at him, then proceeded to gently push my paw over his face as he purred in amusement.

"Hi!" I meowed to Dusty as he came to sit next to me.

"Hi," Dusty responded back softly, his blue eyes burning into mine. He then looked away to flick Swiftkit's head with his tail. "How is this little fox-fighter?"

"Fox-fighter? Hardly!" Swiftkit purred, his paws batting at Dusty's tail. "But you might as well have asked me to shred your tail just now!"

"Oh, please!" Dusty laughed as he pulled his tail away, just as Swiftkit had leaped at it. Swiftkit let out a small squeal as he landed flat on his face in our nest.

"Better not do that in battle," Dusty teased to Swiftkit, running one of his paws over his ear. "That'd be embarrassing."

Swiftkit's head shot up to give Dusty an angry look, but it slowly went away as Swiftkit noticed the glimmer of amusement in Dusty's eyes. He stood back up and settled back next to me as he mewed, "You're lucky you'll never face me in battle!"

Dusty snorted and then turned to face me, his eyes glowing with concern once again. He put his tail tip on my shoulder as he asked, "How are you doing?"

I sighed, suddenly feeling another blow filled with fear, sadness and confusion as I thought about Thornclaw. I sighed and shook my head slowly, looking down at the ground.

"I'm terrified," I whispered, suddenly overwhelmed with emotion. "I don't want him to die."

Dusty stared at me for a few heartbeats before giving me a weak smile and sighing as he shook his head slowly. He then looked out towards the camp, that was now empty as cats were taking shelter. "I would take you out for a hunt, but I don't think that would be

much fun under these circumstances..."

I let out a weak purr of amusement. "You've got that right," I joked. "But I wouldn't be up to hunting much, anyway. I wouldn't be able to think about much else other than..."

Dusty dipped his head, his eyes filled with sympathy. Then, without saying anything else, he took a big stretch and lied down next to me in my nest.

"Well, we're staying right here then!" he exclaimed, flicking my ear with his tail.

My stomach suddenly seemed to fill with butterflies as he had settled down next to me. "You...you'll stay with me? In here?" I asked, meeting his gaze.

"If you want me to, I will," he whispered, not loudly enough for Swiftkit to hear. "There isn't many other places I'd rather be."

The speed of my heartbeat nearly tripled. Touching my nose to Dusty's, I responded back, "Of course I want you to." Teasingly, I then meowed, "There isn't many other cats I'd want by my side."

After I had said that, I found myself not being able to turn away from Dusty's deep and strong blue gaze. I couldn't suppress a smile as we looked into each other's eyes. I noticed Dusty beginning to move his muzzle closer and closer to mine.

I almost wanted to let out a hiss of annoyance as I heard Swiftkit let out a loud yawn. Quickly my eyes moved back over to Swiftkit as I felt him adjust himself in our nest as he tried to sleep again.

I sighed as I watched him close his eyes, and then proceeded to give Dusty one more look before digging my head into his chest fur. I felt him lick my head before wrapping his tail around my back.

For the first time today, I was able to forget all of my worries and just focus on the cats who were with me, lying in the nursery. My son, whom I loved dearly, and a cat who I was feeling closer and closer to with each passing day.

Now, this is a picture that I could easily get used to... I thought as I drifted off into sleep.

Chapter 21

[image]

Swiftkit's POV

Goldenshine's and Dusty's whispers slowly began to fade away as I drifted off into sleep.

I was terrified of the night ahead of me. As much as I didn't want to, I knew that I was probably being sent back to the Dark Forest.

I didn't know what I would come back to see. Would Ashfur and Tigerstar be angry with me for running off? Would Thornclaw's dying body still be there?

I had barely been able to contain the guilt and fear I felt when I had found out that Thornclaw was found in the warriors den, severely injured. I, and only a few more cats in ThunderClan, knew what had really happened to him. The rest of the Clan was left completely confused and baffled.

I hadn't dared talk to any of the ThunderClan cats training in the Dark Forest though. I didn't want make the idea of Ashfur attacking and nearly killing Thornclaw seem more real.

It made me realize how much harm that Ashfur has really done to my kin, and for some reason, I hadn't thought anything of it, and still trained with him, as if he didn't kill my mother's sister or threaten other cats.

And he helped Hawkfrost nearly kill Firestar, for StarClan's sake! I realized.

I knew that in my heart that Ashfur was a very, very dangerous cat, and that training with him and Tigerstar probably was not a good idea.

But... the fact that he is a dangerous cat scares me out of wanting to

back out of it all...

I was overwhelmed with worry and frustration as the nothingness around me suddenly formed into ground, bushes and trees.

Ashfur and Tigerstar were already there waiting for me.

"Swiftkit!" Ashfur began, his eyes filled with feigned concern. "We missed you yesterday! Where did you go?"

Not being able to contain my anger, I spat at him, "What do you expect me to do when I watch you rip my kin apart?"

When neither Ashfur nor Tigerstar spoke, I sunk my claws into the earth and wailed, "Thornclaw could be dead, and it's all your fault!"

I suddenly felt a pang of guilt as I noticed a flash of deep hurt in Ashfur's eyes. Tigerstar's gaze revealed absolutely nothing.

I suppose that's why he can seem so scary... I realized.

I lowered my head to the ground as Ashfur then spoke, his voice choked up with hurt, "*My* fault? How dare you accuse me of something like that?"

I narrowed my eyes as Tigerstar then nodded slowly. "Yes, Swiftkit. Why would you put all of this on him?" He murmured, tilting his head with his eyes big.

"What do you mean?" I asked, my voice shaking. "Ashfur, I watched you attack Thornclaw. I don't know who else to blame!"

"'Who else to blame'?" Ashfur repeated, hissing. His eyes then settled on me and then narrowed. It almost seemed like he was trying to hide a smirk. "The perpetrator is clearly *you*, Swiftkit. I don't understand how you can't see that!" He meowed, seeming genuinely shocked that I would blame him for what had happened.

What?

My mouth dropped open, but no words would come out. My heart began beating at double the speed.

For some reason, I couldn't find anything to say to defend myself. *What if this* is *my fault?*

What if there had been something I could've done to stop it?

Before I could say anything, Tigerstar spoke, "Ashfur wouldn't have had to attack him like that if you hadn't gotten Thornclaw so riled up! You started it!"

"But-" I finally choked out.

"But what?" Ashfur hissed. "How can you possibly speak for yourself, Swiftkit, when you've done something so *terrible*?"

As I began to open my mouth again, Tigerstar cut me off, "It really is okay, Swiftkit. We all make mistakes. Don't beat yourself up too much."

I lowered my head to the ground again, suddenly feeling ashamed. As twisted and outrageous as Ashfur and Tigerstar sounded... what if this was my fault? It echoed in my mind over and over and over again.

If more cats in ThunderClan found out that I had watched Thornclaw nearly get killed and do nothing, and found out that I had started the whole conflict that caused him to nearly get killed, they would blame this on me too.

This... this is my fault...

I squinted my eyes tightly as they welled up with emotion. I turned my head away from the two older cats as I tried to calm down. *My fault... my fault...* I kept thinking as my mind spiraled.

There were a few heartbeats of silence before any cat spoke again. Ashfur finally meowed, "You certainly have been quite the apprentice so far, Swiftkit. You are improving in your battle training, but we have watched you fail at killing a fox for your Clan, and be the cause of one of your Clanmates possibly dying..."

We already know this. Why are you making me feel worse about it? I said to myself, not daring to say it out loud.

"But we see a lot of potential in you, still," Ashfur continued. "The last time you were with us, you told us you were ready to fully take on the training we want to give you here..."

As Ashfur said this, impulsively my mouth opened to interject and tell him that this isn't what I wanted anymore. I was now overwhelmed with shame and doubt, and the last thing that I wanted to do anymore is train in the place where I had gotten my mother's father nearly killed.

The Dark Forest was bringing out the worst in me, I was beginning to realize, and I wasn't sure if it was all as worth it as Tigerstar had made it out to be.

But, as I began to open my mouth, I saw a look in Ashfur's eyes that I had never seen before. It made my fur want to bristle and to sink my body into the ground as lowly as it could go, so that I couldn't see his gaze anymore.

Ashfur's eyes were filled with such a maliciousness, determination and evil that I could barely stand looking at. They almost seemed to be saying, "If you speak up right now, you'll definitely regret it..."

I suddenly felt incredibly trapped.

My eyes widened and I closed my mouth, nodding my head as if gesturing to Ashfur to go on.

And so he did, "So, we are ready to fix you, Swiftkit. Make up for these wrong by training with us and becoming the best warrior that you can be."

I was still filled with uncertainty and fear as Tigerstar went on, "You will be an apprentice very, very soon. There's no way that you can stop now!"

At this statement, all of my worries suddenly went away, and my heart seemed to warm up with excitement. *An apprentice!*

Tigerstar was right. Soon enough I was going to be an apprentice. I was five moons old. It was almost here...

"You can't possibly want to back out now!" Ashfur meowed, echoing Tigerstar. Suddenly they both sounded very kind and encouraging. I was beginning to fall for it. "You're practically going to be at a warrior's level by the time you're apprenticed!"

When I didn't say anything in response, deep in thought, Ashfur's eyes narrowed and he took a step closer to me.

"You certainly don't want to look like a coward, would you?" He murmured.

My teeth clenched and my ears flicked at the word *coward. I would look like a coward if I backed away from training like this...*

Giving in to defeat, I sighed and gave Ashfur and Tigerstar a small nod. Immediately, their eyes glowed and big smirks emerged on both of their faces.

"This is certainly something you won't regret..." Tigerstar whispered, still with the ominous smirk on his face.

I was struck by the comment. It was almost as if Tigerstar had watched Goldenshine's and my conversation we had had earlier.

It had lingered in my mind since it happened, and how Goldenshine had told me that she had never truly regretted any of the choices she had made in her life, because they always turned out better in the end.

What...what if that's the case here? I wondered, my mind suddenly running through all that my mother had told me about her whole situation with Breezepelt. *It felt good while she was doing it, she had to face some consequences, but wasn't there light at the end...?*

I wondered to what extent I was stretching my rationalizations, but I didn't have much time to think about it, as Tigerstar and Ashfur finally wanted to get into some more training.

For the rest of that night, Ashfur proceeded to teach me some more battling moves and techniques.

To my surprise, he was completely gentle and quite patient with

me. It almost seemed like what a normal ThunderClan training session would consist of.

Tigerstar popped in and out of our clearing, watching us train every once in a while. When he was there, he would overwhelm me with positive affirmations and compliments. They felt great, I had to admit, considering they were coming from one of the toughest cats ever known.

Also, the more the night went on, the more comfortable I felt.

I began to wonder if I had been overthinking everything that had gone wrong since I had started training in the Dark Forest. What if Tigerstar and Ashfur really were doing this with the best interest of me succeeding and becoming a tough and great warrior? They had taken the time to thoroughly train me tonight, and they were willing to help me right my wrongs...

That night, as crazy as it would seem to some, I fully committed to training in the Dark Forest, and working hard there to become the best warrior that I could be. I didn't know if it was because that night had been so much better than the others, or if some part of me was still terrified of the look I had seen in Ashfur's eyes, to the point that I felt like continuing to train there was what I had to do.

Whatever the reason, I was doing it, and I knew that I couldn't back down now.

As my training session with Ashfur came to an end, and the shadowy forest around me began to fade, I knew that if I was continue to train here, I needed to do a few things.

The more I train here, the more suspicious cats will be of me, I realized. *I need to rest more during the day when I can, so that I don't seem so tired and grouchy all of the time. As much as I hate to admit it, Goldenshine and my denmates deserve more respect than they're getting.*

I nodded to myself as I made this decision. *When I'm not resting, I need to be out playing with the other kits! I may be training to be a tough warrior, but playing with Snowkit, Cherrykit, and Molekit is fun! I can be a normal kit every once in a while, can't I?*

Feeling more at ease than I had been in a while, I opened my eyes and found myself back in the nursery, ready to take on the day ahead.

Chapter 22

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

I took a heavy, deep breath as I watched Jayfeather hover over Thornclaw for what felt like the hundredth time. I sat close by, trying to interpret every single facial expression or action that Jayfeather made. It seemed to be at least half of how I had been spending my time for *days*, now.

Thornclaw had now been lying in the medicine den for a quarter of a moon now, and to my dismay, he didn't seem to be getting much better. The smallest spark of hope that I had was the fact that I had watched him pop in and out of consciousness at least twice. Unfortunately though, each time I had been there to see that happen, Jayfeather would then kick me out of the medicine den immediately, because I would press him with countless questions.

After about half a day would pass by, luckily, Jayfeather would let me back in.

When I wasn't in the medicine den, I was trying to keep extremely busy. I had to be doing something, otherwise my mind would go immediately to the image of my potentially dying mate, and the worst case scenario. I had tried to go on every patrol that was offered to me. I felt like I did at least two hunting patrols and one border patrol a day.

When I wasn't doing that, I was in the medicine den or eating a meal with many other cats to distract me. Luckily the Clan had been very kind to me, inviting me on their patrols and offering to eat with me.

I had actually just finished a quick meal with Cloudtail, Brightheart and Whitewing at sunhigh when I decided to check in on Jayfeather and my mate.

"Jayfeather..." I murmured to the gray tabby tom, after I had watched him tend to Thornclaw for many heartbeats.

Jayfeather let out a loud huff and rolled his deep blue eyes towards me. "Lilypetal, if you ask me one more time how Thornclaw is, I'll give you a few scratches and throw you into this nest with him."

I couldn't suppress a small hiss as I flattened my ears. Obviously, I knew that Jayfeather hadn't meant what he said, but it probably would still sound incredibly upsetting to some.

I just sighed and shook my head slowly. *Sometimes I wonder how Snowflight was able to tolerate him for so long...*

I then suddenly felt a large pang of sympathy towards Jayfeather. Clearly he was just incredibly frustrated right now, and I wasn't making things any better for him. I had to give him lots of credit, for he was spending *all* of his time trying to save Thornclaw, as difficult as he thought that it may be to do.

And, he was doing it all by himself. Leafpool dropped in whenever she could, and when Jayfeather would let her, but Jayfeather was carrying most of the burden.

If only Snowflight was still here, I realized. *She would be such a big help with all of this pressure that Jayfeather is under...*

I then shook my head quickly. *Well, I suppose she kind of is... but nevertheless, I don't think that Snowkit would have all of the expertise she would need to grasp, unfortunately.*

After I took a few heartbeats to compose myself after Jayfeather's words. "Sorry. I'll leave you alone," I muttered. "But I'm coming back later. Count on that."

Jayfeather simply let out a small grunt as I left the medicine den. I sat just a fox-length in front of the entrance, suddenly realizing how much I was shaking.

I don't know how much more I can take of this, I realized to myself. *I miss Thornclaw so much. I'm so scared. I just want to know if there's any hope, but the more Jayfeather treats him, the less he'll tell me.*

I suddenly felt my eyes well up with overwhelming emotion. *I'm so, so scared...*

I couldn't suppress a small whimper as I stared at the ground, shaking my head slowly.

"Lilypetal, are you okay?"

As I heard the kind voice, my ears flicked, and I turned around to see my mother, Mistpelt, standing behind me. Her blue eyes were filled with undeniable concern.

As much as I should appreciate Mistpelt's support, at this point, the last thing I wanted to do was talk to any cat.

I answered my mother, my voice breaking as I spoke, "No. I'm not..."

Mistpelt's eyes widened and suddenly filled with an overwhelming amount of sympathy. More sadness welled up in my hazel eyes, and I felt myself suddenly needing to run away. Before my mother could say anything else, I let out another whimper and then proceeded to whisper, "I have to go."

Without saying anything else, I pelted out of ThunderClan camp and into the forest. I needed to leave the normal routine of Clan life for a moment and clear my head. After running for several heartbeats, I finally stopped near the Ancient Oak, taking a deep breath. There wasn't much hope in getting me to calm down, but wearing myself out wasn't going to help, either.

I began to take a stroll through ThunderClan territory, knowing fully that I would not be able to return to camp any time soon in the condition that I was in.

I tried to take my mind off my spiraling and swirling thoughts, looking up and enjoying the blessing of sunlight and warm weather, as leaf fall was approaching, and warmth wouldn't be around for too much longer. I took in every clearing, bush, and hole. It was the only way I felt I could cope at the moment.

I actually thought I was succeeding in clearing my mind, up until

my eyes caught sight of a juniper berry bush that had now become very familiar to me in recent moons. It wasn't the juniper berry bush itself, but what was underneath it that was very near and dear to my heart.

This is where Snowflight is buried...

Suddenly, looking at this, I was overtaken by an unbearable amount of anger, grief, and sadness. My thoughts filled with images of Ashfur, and the horrible, smug look he gave me every time I saw him, dead or alive. My mind then flashed to images of Snowflight, Thornclaw, and even the fire that swept ThunderClan's camp that felt like seasons ago, when I first found out about Ashfur's wrath.

Sheer anger bubbling up inside me, I began to rake my claws into the dry earth, not being able to suppress a loud growl of frustration.

Ashfur... that sick Ashfur, has taken so much away from me, I thought angrily. *All I did was expose him for who he really was and send him away. Who knew that it would happen practically at the cost of my family?*

I unleashed all of my fury, raking my claws into the ground and shredding grass for what felt like moons. When I became too tired to do it anymore, I let out an exhausted huff and let myself fall to the ground. I felt numb with grief all over again, and I had no idea when I would decide to get up.

In my grief, I wondered if I even had any reason to get up for a while, failing to even think about the whole of ThunderClan, Mistpelt, or Goldenshine. My mind felt too foggy to even think clearly at this point.

It felt as if I had lied in the same place for several moons before I suddenly heard quick pawsteps come up from behind me.

"Lilypetal?" I heard a soft voice murmur.

I rolled onto my other side to see the brown tabby-and-white pelt of Leafpool, standing a couple of fox-lengths from where I was lying.

"Hi, Leafpool," I meowed, forcing myself to sit up and speak kindly.

"Do you need something?"

As I was speaking, I noticed, through lots of sympathy, there was a very noticeable glimmer of excitement in Leafpool's amber eyes.

"Yes, actually," she meowed, her eyes still glimmering. "I need you to come back to camp as soon as you can, if that's okay?"

My heart began to beat faster as my eyes slowly widened.

Leafpool seemed to notice what I was probably thinking. She lashed her tail before announcing, "Thornclaw's awake."

I couldn't suppress a sigh of incredible relief as the former medicine cat then meowed, smiling. "Awake for *real* this time."

Jayfeather's done it! I exclaimed to myself. *I'm sure Leafpool was helping too, considering she was the one to come and get me.* "That's amazing, Leafpool!" I purred. "Thanks.... thank you so much!"

Leafpool smiled and then dipped her head. "He's already looking better," she informed me. Her eyes became even brighter as she then told me, "He's going to be okay, Lilypetal."

For the first time in a quarter moon, I had felt truly happy. I didn't have to fake it anymore. Of course, my grudge and anger I had with Ashfur would never, ever go away as long as I lived, but hearing that Thornclaw was going to be okay brought me up more than I could ever imagine.

As I was suddenly at a loss for words, I felt Leafpool nudge me with her tail. I looked up to see her nodding her head in the direction of camp. "Well, what are you waiting for? Let's go!"

Taking another deep, relieved breath, I then proceeded to trot after Leafpool towards camp. My mind was spinning all over again, but luckily for a better reason now. I was wondering how Thornclaw would be acting, if he would be happy to see me, or... if he could maybe explain what had happened to him?

With Leafpool now right behind me, I burst through the camp entrance and trotted quickly towards the medicine den and

practically leaped inside.

"Jayfeather!" I exclaimed, padding up to where I saw him still hovering over Thornclaw. "Leafpool told me that Thornclaw was awake?"

My heart was then overwhelmed with warmth and love as I heard a weak, but familiar voice come from behind the medicine cat, "Awake... but *extremely* exhausted..."

I looked down to the ground and shook my head slowly, hiding my gigantic smile as I saw Thornclaw try to peer his head around Jayfeather. "Lilypetal, is that you?" He croaked. His eyes widened, then he exclaimed, "Oh my StarClan, come here!"

My eyes welled up with emotion again as I saw his precious ginger face. "You don't have to tell me twice!" I murmured before running over to lie beside him and digging my muzzle into my mate's fur. I already noticed that Jayfeather had backed away to stand by Leafpool. I heard Briarlight, who was also in the den, let out a quiet purr of laughter. I felt Thornclaw try to lift his head to touch his muzzle to mine.

I let out a faint purr and raised up my tail. "Don't you dare move!" I whispered to him. "There's no way I'm letting you get worse. Not now."

"If you were anyone else, I'd probably listen to that command," Thornclaw murmured, finally being able to brush his muzzle against mine. "Too bad that I love you a little too much to sit still..."

I closed my eyes as Thornclaw's muzzle touched mine, letting his familiar and warm scent flood through my nose. *Great StarClan, I'm so happy...* I thought as I then dug my face into his ginger fur, my eyes welling up with emotion all over again.

"I thought you were supposed to be the one worrying about *me* leaving *you* behind..." I whispered to Thornclaw as I felt him wrap his tail around my back. My heart melted as I heard Thornclaw let out a purr of amusement, one of many things I thought I would never hear again.

"How about none of the above?" He purred, lifting up my chin with his tail so I'd meet his gaze. Looking at his glowing pale blue eyes, I couldn't help but touch my muzzle to his again before pulling away.

"I'm glad your beautiful face was one of the first things I got to see when I woke up..." he muttered as we got lost into each other's eyes.

"Oh, hush it," I purred, rolling my eyes. "Cut *Jayfeather* some slack, for StarClan's sake!"

I heard Jayfeather snort from behind me and Leafpool let out a quiet purr of amusement. The both of them had moved over to the herb stock to give Thornclaw and I a bit of privacy.

Becoming more serious again, I didn't avert my gaze from Thornclaw's pale blue eyes, and whispered. "*Never* scare me like that again!" Rubbing my cheek against his, I then meowed, "I love you so much."

"I love you too, Lilypetal," Thornclaw purred. "Don't worry, this cat isn't going for a long time yet!"

As I let out one last purr, I noticed Thornclaw's glittering gaze suddenly darken.

"What's wrong?" I asked him, beginning to panic. "Are you in pain?"

Thornclaw shook his head immediately. "No, that's not it. In fact, I feel better than I have in quite a while."

Thornclaw then looked ahead as he continued, "It's just... no cat here knows the situation of what even happened to me..." He shut his eyes, then growling, "And unfortunately, I don't think they'll be able to."

I narrowed my eyes. By now, it had all pretty much come together for me, and I think I had a pretty good guess as to what had happened to my mate.

"...Did this happen in the Dark Forest?" I reluctantly asked.

Thornclaw sat silently for a few heartbeats, and then hesitantly

nodded.

Sighing, I looked away from Thornclaw for the first time since he had woken up. At this point, I had come to terms with the fact that he was training in the Dark Forest, but it didn't change the fact that it terrified me that he was there, and *clearly* putting himself in danger.

I took a deep breath and faced Thornclaw again. "Who did this to you?" I forced out. "...Even though I think I may know."

His gaze still dark, Thornclaw nodded. "You do."

Another wave of anger then swept through me. My speculations had been correct. I was almost sure at this point that my dream, or nightmare rather, had been real, and that Ashfur really had visited me and threatened me all over again.

Thornclaw went on with an explanation, whispering, "Swiftkit... really *is* training in the Dark Forest. I saw him... and told him that it probably wasn't a good idea for him to be there."

That's precisely what Ashfur told me not *to do,* I realized to myself. *I'm sure Thornclaw wasn't an exception.*

My eyes widened as Thornclaw went on, "Ashfur, as you would expect, didn't like that. That's when he attacked me, and I ended up as I am now."

"Wow," I whispered, suddenly feeling winded with all of the information that was just thrown at me. "What do we do?"

"I don't know," Thornclaw murmured. "I really don't."

I sighed, suddenly feeling stressed and dismayed all over again. Sure, Ashfur wasn't alive anymore and directly couldn't do anything to anyone, but unfortunately, the fact that he was dead meant that we couldn't stop him from what he *could* do.

As I began to drown in scary thoughts, I suddenly was pulled from them as I felt Thornclaw running his tail down my flank. "Hey, what are we being such downers for?" He meowed, sounding much

happier all of the sudden and pulling myself closer to him. "Everything will be okay. Trust me."

I met Thornclaw's pale blue gaze again. "I'll believe you once that ashy-gray fleabag is defeated once and for all..." I muttered through gritted teeth. But, I then took a deep breath and tried to focus on what was in front of me - my mate was awake, and he was okay.

I touched my nose to Thornclaw's and gently lowered his head with my tail. "As much as I wish I could frolic with you out in the forest and maybe go out for a good hunt, you need to rest!" I purred to him. "I'll be right here when you wake up."

Thornclaw let out an exhausted breath, licking my head. "You better be!" He exclaimed before closing his eyes and digging his muzzle into my fur.

I watched him as his quicker breaths began to slow, indicating that he had fallen into a peaceful sleep. *He sure needs it!* I realized.

I then lowered my head into the nest, closing my eyes as well. I wasn't physically injured like Thornclaw was, but my heart felt as if it had been torn out and shoved back in over and over for the past quarter moon.

As I began to slowly drift off into sleep, I was filled with apprehension and lots of curiosity. *Ashfur nearly took the life of my mate, and is currently training my kin in the Dark Forest...* I reflected. *What is he going to do next?*

Too exhausted to handle the strong sense of fear and foreboding I felt, I dug my muzzle into my paws and waited for sleep to grab me.

Chapter 23

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

I quickly scooted out of the way as I saw a mossball fly in my direction. The moss flew into the nursery near where I was sitting. Swiftkit was right behind it, who dove into the nursery to retrieve it. Not even a heartbeat later, he padded out of the nursery with the moss in his mouth and his tail straight up in the air. I gave him a quick lick on the head before he then tossed the mossball forward, and Cherrykit, Molekit, and Snowkit all dove for it at once.

I purred with amusement as I watched them, but I couldn't hold back waves of sadness as well.

It had been a little over a moon since Swiftkit's fox attack and Thornclaw finally getting out of the medicine den from his mysterious injuries. Now, to my disbelief, Swiftkit and Snowkit were becoming apprentices *tomorrow*. I almost wanted to whimper out loud at the thought. It had truly felt like just yesterday that Snowkit and *I* were leaving the nursery to become apprentices, but now, my son was leaving me to become one.

It feels like he was just born! How do queens handle this so often? I wondered.

I also couldn't believe that Snowkit, or Snowflight rather, was becoming an apprentice all over again along with Swiftkit. I watched her as she lightly dove onto Molekit as he was about to leap at the mossball, and she gave him a soft, claws-sheathed blow to the muzzle. I could already see that she had the makings of a great and strong warrior.

But... Snowflight had wanted to become a medicine cat, I realized. *Will Snowkit want to do the same thing? I wonder how Jayfeather would feel about that...?*

As much as these thoughts could overtake me, I realized that I shouldn't let them. It wasn't my choice at all, it was Snowkit's. She had the right to choose any path that she wanted. *It is completely up to her. If she is anything like Snowflight, she'll make it clear as to what she wants to do.*

As for Swiftkit, I had no doubt of the direction he wanted to take. He was meant to be a warrior. He, first off, had made it pretty clear that that was what he wanted to do, and I could already see from the way he played from the other kits that he was meant to hunt and fight for his Clan. He was incredibly clever and agile, and I suppose... *swift* in his movements. It would be hard for prey or another cat to keep up with him!

You'd almost think that he's already been somewhat trained already... I realized. *Whoever gets him as a mentor will be lucky. The only downside to training Swiftkit would be his impatience!*

Although, even thought I knew Swiftkit would be an impatient little furball as long as he lived, I had already noticed a drastic change in his behavior over the past moon. He was a little snappy sometimes, yes, but he had seemed much more lively and kind to others when he could. He also had been playing with the other kits significantly more, and they had completely welcomed him as one of their friends now. With Molekit, of course the two of them being the only tom kits in the nursery, they connected pretty well. Cherrykit, impressively, seemed to take an incredible liking to Swiftkit despite how snappy he was with her sometimes. But, she managed to bring out Swiftkit's softer and kinder side every once in a while. He always seemed to feel incredibly guilty after getting mad at her for something.

Snowkit and Swiftkit had seemed to connect from the first day they met. Snowkit had been so shy, and Swiftkit had been the first cat she had opened up to. And now, they were going to train alongside each other, which I'm sure would make them even closer.

I wonder if it's because they're sort of... kin that they have a special connection? I wondered. *Whatever the reason, I can tell that they are going to become amazing friends.*

I was still enjoying watching the other kits play when, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Pippy and Dusty trot into camp with Hazeltail and Mousewhisker right behind them. Hazeltail and Mousewhisker went over to grab a quick meal from the fresh-kill pile, but when Pippy and Dusty noticed me over by the nursery, their eyes lit up and they both padded quickly over to me.

"Hi, Goldenshine!" Pippy practically squeaked.

I let out a purr of amusement as I stood up. "Hi, Pippy!" I purred. I then shyly looked over to Dusty, my ears suddenly growing hot. "Hi," I murmured to him, smiling.

"Hello, there," Dusty purred, touching his nose to mine.

"We just had the most amazing training session!" Pippy began. "Dusty and I learned *so* many battle moves! Heck, you could throw us into battle right now, and we'd *flay* those mouse-brains!"

"Easy there," Dusty meowed, nudging his sister with his paw, "Let's not ask for a battle!"

"True that!" I exclaimed. "But anyway, that's great! Maybe you two could test them out on me once I've gotten rid of this rascal?" I then meowed, nodding my head towards Swiftkit, who had Cherrykit pinned down.

Pippy then began to lick at her claws. "Hm... you might regret that!" She teased.

"Look who's talking!" Dusty meowed, shaking his head slowly. "Goldenshine would have you on the ground whimpering within heartbeats!"

"Oh, whatever!" Pippy then purred, giving me an affectionate and teasing gaze. Her big green eyes then went to the fresh-kill pile where Mousewhisker and Hazeltail were settling down. "I'm starving, Dusty! Let's get something to eat!"

The two siblings then nodded to me in farewell before excitedly trotting over to the fresh-kill pile. I looked over to where the four kits were still playing, and then glanced over closer to the nursery

to see Poppyfrost watching them close by.

I suppose I'm kind of hungry too! I realized. *Maybe I'll grab something really quickly while Poppyfrost is watching the kits.*

Acting on this, I quickly traveled to the fresh-kill pile, realizing more and more how hungry I actually was. I grabbed a small mouse as I noticed Mousewhisker beckoning me over with his tail. Hazeltail was nowhere in sight, and I realized that she had probably joined the hunting patrol that had just left.

I smiled at the gray and white tom and settled down beside him, excited to get to talk to Mousewhisker. He was one of my closer friends, and he had even posed as the father of Swiftkit when cats became suspicious of Breezepelt and me. I knew that Mousewhisker and I would always have a special connection.

"Hey, Goldenshine!" Mousewhisker said kindly. "It feels like forever since we've talked!"

"For sure!" I agreed. I then smirked as my eyes went to the two former-kittypets, who were talking excitedly to each other as they shared a vole. "You've been so caught up with those two!"

Mousewhisker then snorted. "I certainly have! They both have incredible enthusiasm. Hazeltail and I can't get enough of them!"

"How are they coming along in their training?" I asked him. "They certainly seem to be enjoying it!"

Mousewhisker's eyes were glittering with satisfaction. "Hazeltail seems very happy with Pippy! Dusty is fantastic. I'm honestly happy that Firestar let him in. He was made to be a warrior. He hunts and fights as if he's been here for moons!"

I then tilted my head as I noticed that Mousewhisker seemed to be suppressing a purr of amusement. "What?" I asked, purring myself.

Mousewhisker shook his head slowly before looking up to where Dusty still was. "As true as all of that is, that Dusty can still be as daft as a new apprentice!"

"How so?" I wondered aloud.

Mousewhisker then met my gaze, his green eyes glittering with amusement. "As I said, he's fantastic. That is, when you're not brought up or thought about at all!"

My stomach then seemed to fill with butterflies. "Meaning...?" I asked, trying to suppress a smile.

"Who knew that I'd have to refrain from saying a warrior's name in a training session?" Mousewhisker purred. "Well, I do! Because, Goldenshine, if you are mentioned, Dusty can't focus for the rest of the session!"

Mousewhisker then lightly nudged me, his eyes still teasing. "You'd better stop being so charming, or Dusty will never become a warrior!" He purred.

Shyly, I looked down at my paws, trying to hide my extreme excitement at what I was hearing. "Aw, I'm sure it's not that bad..." I muttered.

Mousewhisker then snorted again. "I would ask you to come see for yourself, but that would defeat the whole purpose, wouldn't it?" He teased.

As I was purring and flicking one of Mousewhisker's ears with my tail, I was suddenly struck when I noticed something strange over towards the medicine den.

A certain small, gray and white cat with sparkling blue eyes was making their way towards the medicine den entrance. Her eyes were wide and curious. She was wandering all around the area, the tip of her tail twitching.

Shocked and a little nervous of what I was seeing, I turned over to where the other three kits were left playing. My eyes locked with Swiftkit's, so I gave him an inquiring look while nodding towards where Snowkit was still wandering. All my son did was glance over at her, shrug, and then go back to playing.

Needing to know what was going on, I looked back over to

Mousewhisker and touched my nose to his. "As much as I'd love to keep chatting, I think I need to deal with this little one over here," I meowed, lashing my tail towards Snowkit.

Mousewhisker dipped his head. "Good luck! I'm sure you know by now that those kits have minds of their own!"

I gave Mousewhisker one last smile before padding over to Snowkit, who was now sitting and staring towards the entrance to the den. I held back extreme bouts of emotion as I was suddenly brought back to the first time I had noticed that Snowflight wanted to be a medicine cat. She had been doing what Snowkit is doing right now, sitting down in front of the den, staring in awe.

Is that what is happening right now? I wondered. I then sat down beside Snowkit and lightly ran my tail down her smaller flank.

Snowkit then seemed to be snapped out of her thoughts. Her eyes widened and she immediately looked up at me. "Oh, hi, Goldenshine!" She mewed kindly.

"Hi, there, Snowkit!" I meowed back. I took a deep breath. "What are you doing here? You looked like you were having so much fun with the other kits!"

Snowkit then nodded quickly. "Oh, I was! But I just had to take a look around here for a bit."

My stomach seemed to twist at her answer. "And why is that?"

Before Snowkit could answer, I then heard urgent footsteps come from inside the medicine den.

Hm... I wonder who that could possibly *be?* I wondered, rolling my eyes.

As I predicted, Jayfeather then poked his gray tabby head out of the medicine den. He stared at Snowkit as if he could see, his teeth barred.

"What are *you* doing here?" He hissed, clearly trying to hide any more emotions he had with just anger. "I don't need kits wandering

around my den."

"Sorry," Snowkit simply said, not being phased by Jayfeather's tone. *Snowflight never was,* I realized. Snowkit then went on, her eyes filled with awe once again. "I just... I had to look around a little bit. I feel like I've been here before."

Jayfeather was silent for a few heartbeats before muttering, "Well, you were in here about a moon ago, pestering Swiftkit when he should have been being cared for..."

"No, no," Snowkit immediately responded, to Jayfeather's dismay and annoyance, I'm sure. "Every detail... it all seems so familiar...."

As Snowkit then seemed to drift off into her thoughts, I glanced at Jayfeather, my eyes wide. Clearly, Snowkit was remembering her time as a medicine cat, incredibly. *If nothing else confirms that Snowflight is in there, this definitely will,* I realized.

I turned away from Jayfeather's gaze and looked back at Snowkit. "Do you... do you have some sort of draw towards being a medicine cat, Snowkit?" I reluctantly asked. I knew that Jayfeather would be uncomfortable with the question, but I knew that I might as well ask the question so we could start dealing with the answer.

To my surprise, Snowkit then looked disgusted. "No way!" She meowed, her pink nose wrinkling. She then gave Jayfeather a sympathetic look. "I mean, it looks awesome and everything, but I really want to be able to hunt and fight for my Clan!"

I, along with Jayfeather seemingly, was suddenly overwhelmed with relief. *She wants to be a warrior.* As much as I wanted Snowkit to follow what she wanted to do, her being a medicine cat all over again would have been quite strange to deal with, especially for Jayfeather, I'm sure. He had made that pretty darn clear already!

Before Jayfeather and I could say anything in response to what Snowkit said, Snowkit let out a long sigh and took one last scan at the medicine den as if she was any other cat looking back at their old home after many moons. "So weird..." she then muttered before trotting back over to the other kits.

I immediately faced Jayfeather after Snowkit left. "Satisfied?" I murmured, raising an eyebrow.

Jayfeather rolled his eyes. "Hardly," he muttered before turning back into the medicine den.

I narrowed my eyes before following him in. "What do you mean?" I asked. "She doesn't want to be a medicine cat!"

Jayfeather blind eyes then fell dark. "As much as a relief that is... that's what scares me."

I didn't say anything, suddenly very intrigued. I simply tilted my head as Jayfeather went on, who was seemingly deep in thought and a bit worried, to my surprise. "If Snowkit's... or Snowflight's destiny rather, is not to be a medicine cat... then what is it?"

Chapter 24

[image]

Swiftkit's POV

"Swiftkit? Swiftkit! Get your lazy tail out of that nest!"

I was very tempted to claw out the eyes of whoever had just woken me up, but I suppressed the urge and simply let out a yawn, not wanting to open my eyes yet. Keeping my eyes closed didn't get rid of the voice though.

"What are you waiting for? Leaf-bare? Get up!"

I let out a hiss and finally stood up in my nest. To my surprise, Goldenshine wasn't beside me, and Snowkit was standing in front of me, her blue eyes wide and eager.

How she is able to be so energetic this early, I will never know. The more Snowkit pestered me with her enthusiasm, the more annoyed I got. I hissed at her, "And what exactly gave you the burning desire to wake me up like this, you mouse-brain?"

Snowkit wasn't phased. To my annoyance, she only got more excited. "You're calling *me* a mouse-brain, mouse-brain?" Snowkit purred. "Our apprentice ceremony is today! Get *with* it!"

Suddenly, all of my grogginess and annoyance with Snowkit went away at that realization. *I'm going to be an apprentice today! One step closer to becoming a warrior. And I'll* finally *get to show off what I've learned in the Dark Forest!*

Speaking of the Dark Forest, things there had been fairly good, and to my luck, much more underwhelming than past encounters. I feel like I had truly learned so much from Ashfur and Tigerstar. They could actually be phenomenal mentors when they weren't frightening me out of my fur. I was so excited now that I would be able to actually make use of the head start they were giving me!

Now feeling as excited as Snowkit was, I suppressed a squeal and then followed her out of the nursery.

The sun was already high in the sky, and that sight made me feel all the more awake and ready to go. One of the first things I saw when I left the nursery was Goldenshine, already sitting down near the Highledge, probably waiting for the apprentice ceremony to start.

"It's about time!" She purred, touching her nose to mine. "I was the one who had to send Snowkit to come get you! I thought you were going to be in that nursery sleeping for a moon!"

I rolled my eyes but purred also, "Whatever. Thanks, I guess."

Goldenshine snorted and lightly pushed my head with one of her paws. "'Thanks, I guess'?" She meowed, purring with amusement. "Here's an idea: say that word for word to Firestar when he gives you your apprentice name."

As I let out a *mrrow* of laughter, Firestar's yowl sounded from the Highledge above Goldenshine and me. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the Highledge!"

Snowkit, who was now beside me, let out another excited squeak and lightly nudged my shoulder. We exchanged an enthusiastic glance before looking behind us to watch all of the cats emerging and gathering under the Highledge to join us.

"How wild is this?" I heard Snowkit murmur as the cats of ThunderClan were beginning to find their places and settle down.

When Firestar seemed to think that every cat was assembled, he began speaking again. "Cats of ThunderClan, we are gathered here this sunhigh to witness one of the ceremonies that any leader is very proud to perform - the making of new apprentices."

Firestar's eyes then looked down to where Snowkit and I were sitting. My eyes widened as my gaze met Firestar's. He then went on, "Swiftkit and Snowkit have reached six moons of age, and are ready to become apprentices. Could the two of you please step forward?"

I took a deep breath as I saw Snowkit slowly begin to pad forward. I then followed closely behind. My heart was beating so quickly that I thought for sure that all of ThunderClan would hear it. I shivered with anticipation.

Firestar nodded to Snowkit first, who looked just as eager as I felt. "Snowkit, from this day forward, until you become a warrior, you will be known as Snowpaw." Firestar then nodded to a certain white she-cat that was sitting a few tail-lengths away. "Your mentor will be Icecloud, who I know will do her best to pass down all she has learned to you."

Snowpaw turned her head back to meet Icecloud's gaze. Snowpaw gave her a kind smile and slowly padded over to Icecloud, to my surprise. *It still amazes me how one moment she can be so loud and enthusiastic, but when she's introduced to a cat she doesn't know, she can be so shy!*

I couldn't suppress a wave of pride as I watched my friend touch noses with Icecloud. I was also happy that Snowpaw was able to become an apprentice with me, like she should be able to. Even though Poppyfrost was technically Snowpaw's foster mother, with Cherrykit and Molekit as her foster-siblings, it was determined that Snowpaw was a little older than the two of them were.

Thank StarClan that she didn't have to be held back with them! I realized.

Before I even realized what was happening, I then heard Firestar call my name. I was snapped back into reality as I met the ThunderClan leader's green gaze.

"Swiftkit, until you become a warrior, you will be known as Swiftpaw," Firestar meowed clearly. He then flicked his tail to the reddish-brown tabby tom sitting near Icecloud. "Your mentor will be Foxleap, who I also trust will pass down all that he knows to you."

I felt another rush of excitement as I turned towards my new mentor. *Cool!* I thought. *Foxleap seems tolerable, and a great young warrior. I wonder how different it'll be training with him versus Ashfur?*

I then had to push back apprehension and annoyance. *He better not treat me like a newborn kit!*

Trying not to let these thoughts get to me, I gave Foxleap a smile and trotted quickly up to him. "Hi!" I meowed to him as enthusiastically as I could. I didn't want Foxleap to think that he had been given a lazy or dreary apprentice.

"Hi, Swiftpaw!" Foxleap said kindly, touching his nose to mine. "I am *so* excited to train you. We're going to have so much fun!"

Fun, huh? I repeated to myself. *I wonder how Ashfur would feel about me having "fun"?* I didn't get much time to think about it, because my thoughts were then interrupted by the chants of my Clanmates.

"Snowpaw! Swiftpaw! Snowpaw! Swiftpaw!"

I couldn't help but then puff out my chest in pride. *Great StarClan, that sure sounds nice! Swiftpaw...*

I suddenly realized how anxious I was to get started. The more time that passed by, the more I was wanting to see what ThunderClan training was like. I turned back to meet Foxleap's gaze. "What are we doing first?" I asked, my tail twitching eagerly.

I then saw Foxleap exchange a glance with his sister. "Icecloud and I thought that we could spend today exploring the territory!" I tilted my head as my new mentor's eyes then glittered with amusement. "Even though... Swiftkit, you've already done that, slightly?"

My ears then grew hot. I hated being reminded of the failed fox mission I had went out into ThunderClan territory to try and fulfill. Not being able to suppress my anger and embarrassment, I then hissed, "Hey! That's not funny!"

I then realized immediately how unjustified my anger had been. I took a deep breath. "Sorry," I muttered.

Luckily, Foxleap hadn't seemed affected by my harsh words. He smiled and put his tail tip on my shoulder. "Don't be sorry, Swiftpaw! *I'm* sorry, I won't bring that up again!" I began smiling again as Foxleap went on. "You're an apprentice now! Let's put that

behind us!"

I nodded as new thoughts began swirling inside of my head. *Foxleap is so easygoing and nice! I suppose he will be enjoyable to train with. I just hope he doesn't make me too soft for Ashfur and Tigerstar to stand me...*

Icecloud, who was now sitting beside Snowpaw, nodded to the camp entrance. "Well, what are we waiting for? Let's go!" She purred, then starting for the entrance.

Snowpaw and I exchanged an excited glance as we began to follow our mentors, who had now taken the lead as we traveled out into the forest.

"Wow!" I heard Snowpaw whisper. I turned my head towards her to see that her dusty white head was looking straight up into the trees. I followed her gaze and looked up at the trees too. I couldn't help but drop my mouth down in awe.

I never got to see the forest like this when I went out for the fox! I realized. *This is all so pretty during the day!*

I could've stared there staring up at the trees all day if I hadn't heard Foxleap meow, "Icecloud, let's show them the lake first!"

Excitedly, Snowpaw and I then began to follow Foxleap and Icecloud towards where, I'm assuming, the lake was. As we traveled, I noticed how mesmerized she seemed to be by everything. But, there was something else in her blue gaze... a more, knowing look?

Almost as if Snowpaw could sense my curiosity, she then murmured, "Some of this still seems so familiar..."

My eyes narrowed. Had Snowpaw once escaped out into ThunderClan territory too? "What do you mean?" I asked out loud.

Snowpaw didn't answer for a few heartbeats. Eventually, she meowed, "I just feel like I've seen all of this before... Even things as precise as certain bushes, briars or trees look completely recognizable to me." Snowpaw then shook her head quickly. "I don't

see how that's possible, though."

I tilted my head. "Are you maybe remembering when you were lost out here in the forest as a kit?" I asked her. "You could have been wandering around ThunderClan territory for *days* before Squirrelflight, Brambleclaw, Cloudtail and Brightheart had found you!"

Snowpaw, now seeming incredibly deep in thought, took another few heartbeats before answering, "Yeah... yeah. You're probably right." I narrowed my eyes once again as I realized how unconvinced she sounded.

I wondered if Snowpaw was going to be acting weirdly throughout the whole territory tour, but luckily, as soon as we arrived down to the lake she seemed to turn back to her old, enthusiastic self again. By the end of the tour, her enthusiasm certainly hadn't faltered, but she seemed deep in thought all over again as we traveled back to camp, the sun setting before our eyes.

Before I decided I would question her some more, I padded up to walk next to Foxleap. There was a question I wanted to ask before we returned to the camp for good. "Are we possibly going to do any battle training today?" I asked eagerly.

Foxleap let out a purr of amusement and then proceeded to shake his head. "Not today, Swiftpaw, but just within a few days, just you wait!"

I gave Foxleap a simple nod, but inside, I felt a little disappointment. *I was really hoping to show off some of my skills today!* My gaze then went back to Snowpaw, who had the same mesmerized look in her eye as she had earlier in the day.

I slowed my pace and then gave Snowpaw a nudge as we traveled behind Icecloud and Foxleap. "What's going on in there?" I teased.

Snowpaw shook her head quickly again and met my gaze. "Am I doing it again? Great StarClan, I'm sorry!" She meowed. She got herself together before answering, "It's just so weird! I feel like even if Icecloud and Foxleap hadn't been with us, I would be able to find

my way around this territory with my eyes closed!"

Before I could press Snowpaw any further, I heard a small rustle come from a nearby bush. Instinctively, I let out a small hiss and lifted up my tail to signal to the other cats that prey was near. I went into a hunting crouch as I caught the scent of a mouse. I welled up with pride as I then saw the small creature make its way out of the bush I had heard it come from. I slowly began to creep towards it, being mindful of each step I was taking.

If I can't integrate any of my battle skills yet, at least I can show Foxleap that I can hunt, thanks to Ashfur! I thought happily.

When I thought the time was right, I leaped at the mouse. Luckily, I landed right on top of it and was able to kill it with one bite. *My first catch!*

I picked it up and turned back to the others to see Icecloud and Foxleap's eyes wide with amazement.

"Wow, great job, Swiftpaw!" Foxleap purred. "And you didn't need one bit of direction!"

"Yeah, great job!" I heard Snowpaw meow, who seemed to be snapped out of her thoughts once again. She lightly cuffed me over the ear before all four of us began traveling back to camp. The stars of Silverpelt were beginning to appear above us.

Once we arrived back in camp, most cats were already in their dens for the night. The only cats that were in camp were the ones about to leave for a border patrol. Icecloud, Foxleap, Snowpaw and I shared the plump mouse that I had caught for a quick meal. Then, Icecloud and Foxleap told us that we were done for the night.

"Great StarClan, I can't wait for more training with Icecloud and Foxleap!" Snowpaw murmured. "They're so fun!"

I nodded to her in agreement as we crawled into the medicine den. Luckily, two dens were already set for us. I nodded to Ivypaw and Dovepaw who were already curled up in their nests, before settling down into my own. It was then that I realized how exhausted from

the day I truly was. *Exploring the whole territory will take a bit of a toll on a cat!* I realized before closing my eyes. Although I was tired, it was definitely a good type of tired. As Snowpaw had said, Icecloud and Foxleap were really fun, and they definitely seemed to push a cat to their limits of their energy in their training.

Now I suppose it's time for a different kind of training, I thought as I opened my eyes I find myself in the familiar bleak forest I had woken up to every night now for the past moon.

As I anticipated, I stood up and turned around to see Ashfur waiting for me. He had on his usual smirk and the ambitious look in his blue eyes.

"Welcome, Swiftpaw," Ashfur meowed, his smirk widening. "Congratulations on your apprenticeship."

"Thanks," I muttered, shifting my paws on the earth, suddenly feeling a pang of apprehension. *Should I feel badly that I had lots of fun today? I wouldn't be surprised if Ashfur found a way to guilt me about it somehow...*

But luckily, the gray tom didn't. He simply padded up to me and touched my shoulder with his tail tip. "Great job catching that mouse. You're already ahead of your competition!"

That word struck me. *Competition? I don't know if I'd like to think of Snowpaw as "competition". She's my friend!*

Before I could respond and thank Ashfur again, I suddenly realized something. I began to scan my surroundings. "Where's Tigerstar tonight?" I asked Ashfur as he watched me look around.

"Right here," I heard a deeper voice answer me. I turned around from where I was looking and saw Tigerstar emerging to stand next to Ashfur. He met my gaze. "Sorry that I am a little late. I was having an important discussion with one of your fellow ThunderClan apprentices here."

I tilted my head, suddenly filled with curiosity. "Who? What about?" I asked, not even realizing that I already may be pressing too much.

Tigerstar simply smirked and then answered. "Let's just say that something big is coming your Clan's way very soon," he murmured. "And that it needs to happen."

Before I could ask any more, Tigerstar turned towards Ashfur and flicked his tail towards me. "Well, what are we waiting for? Time to get this new apprentice more ahead than he already is!"

I was overwhelmed with pride once again at those words, and from there, training for that night began.

As we trained, I tried my hardest to stay focused as my thoughts swirled with curiosity, and wondering what possibly Tigerstar had meant by his words. I would never admit it to Ashfur or Tigerstar out loud, but it all scared me. I was filled with a new sense of foreboding and sudden fear for my Clan.

What is Tigerstar up to? I hope I find out as soon as he's saying I will...

Chapter 25

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

I was taking a huge bite out of a vole as loud purrs of amusement burst around me. I lifted my head back up as I chewed, continuing to listen to Squirrelflight, who had been sharing a story of how when she was a kit, she once shoved fire ants in Leafpool's nest for her to find when she woke up.

I gulped down my bite of vole and shook my slowly as she closed off her anecdote. Brambleclaw, who was sitting beside Squirrelflight, nudged her with his shoulder and let out another purr. "Great StarClan! And all Leafpool did was be herself!" he joked. "I can't imagine what you would've done if she'd actually done something to make you angry!"

I turned to Thornclaw, who was sitting next to me. I nudged him as Brambleclaw had done to Squirrelflight. "Good thing Goldenshine never did that to Snowflight," I commented. "She'd *never* hear the end of it!"

Thornclaw narrowed his eyes and smirked. "Hey! Who said that Goldenshine would be the culprit?" he meowed, a purr of laughter emerging as he spoke. "Snowflight would have been capable of such things if Goldenshine rubbed her fur the wrong way!"

I purred as I bent my head down to take another bite of my vole. As I savored the sweet taste, I thought about happy and relaxed I felt at the moment.

Squirrelflight, Brambleclaw, Thornclaw and I had just returned from a hunting patrol, and now we were treating ourselves to a little break and a nice meal. I loved every moment of it. It was nothing but spending time with friends and serving our Clan, and ourselves just a *tad* bit.

Luckily, Thornclaw had had no problems keeping up with us on the patrol. By now, he was fully recovered from his injuries. After he had awoken he had spent just about another quarter moon in the medicine den before being told he could return to his normal duties. Now, he was as strong as ever, serving his Clan in any way he could.

Brambleclaw had just started telling us one of his silly apprentice stories when I noticed Firestar approaching the four of us out of the corner of my eye.

I nodded my head to signal to the others that Firestar was coming, and they immediately turned their heads to face him as he sat down. Before any of us could greet the ThunderClan leader, he spoke first. I immediately became uneasy as I noticed the worried and agitated gleam that seemed to be glittering in his emerald eyes.

Firestar worried? I thought. *That can't be good.*

"Do you all have a moment to come and gather in my den?" he began. He didn't wait for our answer, immediately turning around and then muttering, "We have a very important matter to discuss."

Brambleclaw, Squirrelflight, Thornclaw and I all exchanged worried glances before standing up and following Firestar up onto the Highledge and into his den.

By the way Firestar was acting, I knew that whatever he wanted to discuss was incredibly serious. I rarely saw Firestar act this way, so tense and closed off. He clearly had something heavy on his mind.

Just behind Thornclaw, I crawled into Firestar's cozy den, and to my surprise, found many other cats there with him. Graystripe, Dustpelt, Sandstorm, Brightheart, Cloudtail, Jayfeather and *Ivypaw* were already there waiting for us as we all entered.

What in the name of StarClan is an apprentice doing here, when Firestar had "an important matter to discuss"?

I took a deep breath and shook it off. I told myself that I would find out why soon enough.

Once Squirrelflight, Brambleclaw, Thornclaw and I had settled in, Firestar began to speak. "Thank you all for coming here. I have gathered you all to tell you about something that has been brought to my attention that needs to be discussed."

Firestar took a deep breath, and then cut right to the chase, nodding to Ivypaw as he spoke. "Ivypaw has come to me and told me that she had a dream." The ginger tom then glanced around the den to make sure he had every cat's attention before speaking again, "I think it's a sign from StarClan."

I felt my eyebrows raise. *Ivypaw?* I thought, stricken. *She seems like a terrific apprentice, but I'm not sure StarClan would choose her to transfer a sign...*

I suddenly felt Thornclaw flinch beside me. "*Ivypaw?*" he meowed scornfully, repeating my thoughts. I turned to him and saw that my mate looked just as unsure as I felt.

I then noticed Brightheart shoot Thornclaw a somewhat angry glance. "Why not?" she muttered.

Cloudtail nodded beside her. "Our daughter's kit wouldn't lie."

I then turned back to Thornclaw to see what his response would be. "I'm not saying she'd lie," he meowed, "I just want to know the reason Firestar's taken it so seriously."

"Me too," I murmured, feeling like I should put a word in. "But I suppose it *should* be taken seriously, considering theoretically, StarClan chose *Ivypaw,* an *apprentice,* to pass on the sign. That must mean something..."

Graystripe nodded in agreement and then meowed, his eyes dark, "She seemed to know more than she should."

Thornclaw snorted beside me and then proceeded to comment, "Apprentices always know more than they should!"

"This sounds different," Brambleclaw meowed, looking thoughtful.

I then saw Dustpelt shake his head quickly. "Okay, okay. Let's say

this dream was a message from StarClan," he began. "What was it?"

Firestar answered, "She dreamed that ShadowClan had invaded, that the stream along the clearing where Twolegs come in greenleaf was running with ThunderClan blood."

I listened very intently to Firestar's description. "Do we know what it means?" I asked after he had finished.

"It's pretty easy to guess," Dustpelt answered, "ShadowClan wants to push the advantage they got from being given the clearing in the first place. They want more of our territory."

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. *Because a territory dispute is exactly what we need right now,* I thought sarcastically. *But unfortunately, it sounds like this is what this is leading to...*

This seemed to rub Firestar the wrong way more than it had to me, but he managed to remain calm, meowing, "The decisions I make may not always be right, but they are based on reason and experience."

"No cat doubts your reason," Dustpelt then conceded, to my relief. "But any cat with experince much know that ShadowClan will always take advantage wherever they can."

I become nervous as I heard a growl begin to rise in Graystripe's throat. Considering he was typically such an easygoing cat, it made me a bit nervous. "There's always the hope that if we treat them like true warriors they'll start acting with honor instead of preying on weakness wherever they find it."

I then twitched, startled, as Firestar exclaimed, "Enough!" causing every cat in the den to fall silent. "We're here to discuss the safety of ThunderClan, not ShadowClan's honor. If Ivypaw's dream is right, we must act."

As things calmed down, all of the cats in the den proceeded to discuss what we were going to do when it came to acting upon Ivypaw's supposed "sign". To my dismay, we eventually decided that we were going to attack ShadowClan, and take back the land that

Firestar had apparently given to them originally a while back.

"We must attack before they do," Firestar meowed definitively.

"Now?" Dustpelt, who was now pacing, meowed.

"Not yet. I must warn them first."

I tilted my head. Warn *them of a* battle*?* I repeated to myself. *If I hadn't seen Firestar perform phenomenally as a leader before, I would think he was mad!*

"Warn them?" Brambleclaw echoed, sounding shocked. "You'll have lost the battle before you've begun it!"

"We can win any battle," Firestar insisted. "I'm going to give Blackstar a chance to surrender the clearing peacefully."

I seriously *doubt it would go in Firestar's favor,* I thought.

"Firestar, are you sure?" I couldn't help but meow. "Blackstar doesn't handle things as calmly as you do, typically."

As some cats quietly purred in amusement, Firestar insisted, "I must give him the chance. No blood will be spilled needlessly."

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My head faced the ground as I traveled next to Brambleclaw, Firestar and Jayfeather towards ShadowClan territory. I honestly don't think I had ever felt as nervous as I was now, if you don't include my nerves revolving around anything having to do with Ashfur, or waiting for my mate to wake up from nearly dying.

Okay, I've been more nervous in my life, but I was still very nervous.

After the senior warriors had come to a conclusion that we were going to talk to ShadowClan peacefully before deciding if we had to attack them, Firestar had chosen a few cats to come with him to do just that. He had chosen Brambleclaw, his deputy, of course, Jayfeather, and to my surprise, he had picked me to come along as

well.

The leader, the deputy, the medicine cat with tan additional warrior will look intimidating, but not enough to make Blackstar think that we are ambushing right now, I realized to my relief.

My stomach twisted as Firestar and Brambleclaw tasted the air, then proceeded to cross into ShadowClan territory.

I screwed my eyes shut as we traveled. *So it has really come to this,* I thought. *Things have been so peaceful lately. Do we really have to act on Ivypaw's dream?*

My fears came alive as I suddenly heard Jayfeather hiss, "Patrol!"

All of us immediately halted at Jayfeather's warning. Firestar looked ahead and then meowed, "We've come to speak with Blackstar!"

I lifted my head to see Toadfoot and Ratscar emerge to stand in front of our patrol. As I would expect, they seemed incredibly wary at the sight of ThunderClan warriors in their territory.

"What do you want with him?" Ratscar growled, remaining hostile.

"To talk," Firestar simply answered.

To my surprise, after that Ratscar and Toadfoot exchanged a glance and then complied with Firestar's request, and began to lead us through their camp entrance and into the camp itself.

Almost immediately, I saw Blackstar appear in front of our patrol. "Why has ThunderClan's leader come to ShadowClan?" he meowed, his eyes narrowing.

Firestar answered, "I need to talk to you. In private, please."

Blackstar then lashed his tail. "In *private?*" he repeated, beginning to slowly walk around me, Brambleclaw and Jayfeather.

Great StarClan, stop getting yourself riled up and listen to what Firestar has to say so we can get out of here! I thought frustratedly.

"Why so secret?" the ShadowClan leader then asked, clearly full of distrust at us.

Firestar then smirked. "Feel free to match my Clanmates with your own."

"How generous of you."

Blackstar then lifted his head, clearly wanting his voice to carry. "Russetfur! Littlecloud! We have company."

Then, Blackstar proceeded to lead us across the clearing towards his den. My stomach felt like it was completely in a twist. Anything could happen in this meeting. How would Blackstar react? Would he be infuriated? What if we wanted to fight us right now? What if Firestar or Brambleclaw suddenly got fiesty and took a jab at Blackstar?

I then shook my head quickly, annoyed that my kittypet instincts were seeming to creep on me, making me feel more scared than I actually was. *Don't be ridiculous. None of that nonsense is going to happen. Nevertheless, you can handle* whatever *happens.*

Before I knew it, our ThunderClan patrol was crawling into Blackstar's den with the ShadowClan leader guiding us in.

Blackstar sat down in front of us, wrapping his tail around his paws. "What do you want?" he meowed briskly.

I nearly flinched as Firestar didn't hesitate to tell Blackstar *what* he wanted.

"I want you to give the Twoleg clearing back to ThunderClan."

I screwed my eyes shut as Blackstar then rasped, "What?"

Firestar went on, "We gave it as a gift, but you've pushed at our forest borders once too often."

I dug my claws into the den floor anxiously as Russetfur then hissed, "That's not true! You just want extra hunting lands. Have your greedy warriors hunted the forest clean?"

The tension was clear in the den as the ThunderClan and ShadowClan warriors then delved into a hostile back and forth over the border that had caused us this visit in the first place.

After a few harsh words were passed, Brambleclaw growled, "We want our land back."

I meowed apprehensively, "It was ours to begin with, anyway. We think you took advantage of the kind gesture a little too much."

"Well, it's *our* land *now!*" Russetfur spat at me. I tried to not show any fear at her rashness.

I looked over fearfully at Firestar as he meowed, "Then we'll have to take it by force."

To my dismay, Blackstar then hissed, "If you want a battle, you'll have one."

No... I thought. Does this have to be resolved with battle? *I definitely can handle a battle, but what if Ivypaw's dream was wrong? Is this fight necessary?*

"Very well," Firestar then answered. "My warriors will be setting the new boundary tomorrow at dawn. It's your choice whether to stop them."

"Don't play that game!" Blackstar hissed. "You're the one leading your Clan into battle."

I was overwhelmed with apprehension as me, Firestar, Brambleclaw and Jayfeather were then escorted to our own border. So much had managed to happen in such a sort amount of time. At sunhigh, it had just been a normal day.

And now, Firestar was going to be leading his Clan in battle tomorrow at dawn.

A/N

Whoa! I don't think I've done an author's note in quite a while! Well, here we are!

I just wanted to make it clear to you all that I know that I used direct quotes from Fading Echoes. That is because, in this fanfictions, my characters are living through what the real Warriors characters are. All of the quotes, plotlines, and characters I use from the legit Warriors series belong to ERIN HUNTER, and I am NOT claiming them as my own. Anyway, that's all! I just wanted to make that known (haha, that rhymed). Hopefully you all had fun sort of "reliving" what happened in this part of Fading Echoes! There will be more reliving coming soon!

~ may StarClan light your path ~

- warriorcatlover345

Chapter 26

[image]

Swiftpaw's POV

"Great!" Purred Foxleap. "Awesome job, Swiftpaw."

I let out a small huff of satisfaction as I backed away from Foxleap, who I had pinned down. We had been battle training since dawn, and although it didn't feel nearly as exhilarating as battle training did with Ashfur and Tigerstar in the Dark Forest, I still thoroughly enjoyed it.

I could tell that Foxleap was impressed by how easily things *seemed* to come to me. I knew that the whole purpose of me training in the Dark Forest was to get me ahead, and it was certainly working. About halfway through our training, I think Foxleap had found himself having to be less and less thorough with his directions when he was teaching me a battle move.

In fact, it had been this way since I had first become an apprentice about a quarter moon ago. I tried not to show it, but a lot of the teaching that Foxleap was giving me, I already knew. But, I highly respected Foxleap already as a Clanmate and as a mentor, so I tried really, *really* hard not to cut him off and tell him I knew what he was talking about, as impatient as I felt sometimes.

I didn't get off completely easy, though. Although I went into my apprenticeship being well informed of a lot of things already, Tigerstar and Ashfur had only taught me the special fighting moves that Clan cats typically didn't know much about, so that meant I wasn't aware of battle moves specific to ThunderClan. I was glad to learn at least *something* new.

After I had released Foxleap from underneath me, he backed away and proceeded to stretch out, lashing his tail in the air. "Okay, Swiftpaw," he began, "Before we head back to camp, let's test you a bit."

I tilted my head, immediately captured by my mentor's words.

Foxleap finally stood up from his stretch. "I want to see you integrate what I've taught you so far," he meowed, his eyes narrowed. "Attack me. Let's see what happens."

I couldn't suppress a smirk. *Time to show Foxleap what I've got!*

Without hesitation, I leaped on Foxleap, throwing him off by facing his left shoulder, but proceeding to leap to the right. I immediately was able to bowl him over, despite my slightly smaller size. Before I knew it I had him pinned down. Then, Foxleap lightly knocked me back with hind paws. I flew back, rolled backwards, but immediately was able to jump back up as I saw Foxleap jumping at me. I let out an excited hiss and was able to quickly dodge the dark ginger tom. As I swerved out of the way, I had managed to give Foxleap a small swipe with a sheathed paw. Unfortunately though, that just gave Foxleap more time to leap back on me. I rolled over, Foxleap landing on his side. I jumped up, raising one of my paws in the air.

Foxleap raised one of his paws from where he was lying, as if to tell me to stop. "Alright, alright, Swiftpaw!" He meowed, his voice full of laughter. "That's all we'll do for today." He then stood up, shaking out his fur. "That was great for a first try, Swiftpaw," he complimented. "You are quick. Very quick, and strong. You definitely would be able to defend yourself in a battle."

I flicked my ears, my eyes widening. "Really?" I asked. *I'm barely into my apprenticeship and my mentor tells me I could defend myself in a battle? Is the Dark Forest paying off or what?*

Foxleap nodded, his eyes gleaming with satisfaction. "I wouldn't tell you that if it wasn't true. *No* mentor would, in fact," he answered as he began to pad towards camp, beckoning me with his tail. "Firestar will definitely know about this!"

I couldn't suppress an excited shiver. *This is awesome! I can't wait to be able to defend my Clan in battle, and I may get to do it earlier than any other apprentice.*

As I began to follow Foxleap back to camp, I wondered about something. *I wonder why not all apprentices and kits get this opportunity? All cats have potential to be great hunters and fighters, I suppose. Why aren't Ashfur and Tigerstar trying to recruit them too? Ashfur and Tigerstar are doing this to help other cats, right?*

My eyes narrowed as I delved deeper and deeper into my thoughts, letting out a small hiss. *Don't be stupid. This is the Dark Forest. I knew I was taking some risks when I decided to train with them, and that they have some sort of plan in mind. I still wish I knew what it was.*

My mind then went back to the night after I had become an apprentice, when Tigerstar had emerged from the shadows and told me that he had been discussing something with a ThunderClan apprentice. Something that was "needed" for the Clans. It had been a quarter moon since that encounter, and I nearly wanted to rip out my fur with anxiety.

And I couldn't talk to any cat about it either. Then, they would figure out everything I was doing - that I was training in the Dark Forest, which would probably lead to them finding out that Thornclaw nearly dying was all my fault.

Just as I was about to stop and rip at the grass below me, I flicked my ears as I heard Firestar's yowl come from camp. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the Highledge for a Clan meeting!"

Foxleap stopped from where he was trotting in front of me, waiting for me to catch up to him. "Uh, oh. I wonder what this is about?" He murmured. He and I exchanged a nervous look before finally making it to the camp entrance.

By the time we arrived, many cats were already gathered. I scanned the group of cats, and decided to settle down beside Dovepaw, who I noticed was looking with narrowed eyes up at the Highledge. I followed my gaze to find *Ivypaw* sitting next to Firestar up on the ledge.

What in the name of StarClan? I then found my eyes narrowing as well, but before I could ask Dovepaw, Ivypaw's sister, about it,

Firestar began to speak.

"As many of you all already know, I, along with Jayfeather, Brambleclaw and Lilypetal, have just gotten back from a meeting with Blackstar..." Firestar then closed his eyes and took a deep breath before speaking again. "You are probably wondering the premise of the visit... You all know I am not one to look for trouble."

I scanned the camp. ThunderClan cats were staring up at Firestar, their eyes seemingly filled with apprehension and curiosity.

"Ivypaw here has had a dream that I believe to be a sign from StarClan," Firestar continued. "I have also spoken to my senior warriors about it. We believe that it means that we must retrieve the land that we gifted to ShadowClan moons ago."

Quiet gasps emerged around the clearing as Firestar went on. "We went to Blackstar to see if we could retrieve the land back peacefully. As expected, Blackstar wouldn't budge."

I let my claws unsheathe and dig into the earth below me as I felt the tension in the camp rising.

"Tomorrow at dawn, we are going to travel towards ShadowClan and mark down the territory we deserve. If ShadowClan wants to fight over it, that's exactly what we'll do."

To my surprise, lots of meows of triumph rose around me. I tried to let myself feel as excited as they looked. *I suppose taking the land back that ShadowClan is taking advantage of is a good idea,* I realized as the meeting began to break out.

Almost immediately, Foxleap caught my eye, who had been sitting next to his father, Dustpelt. His eyes were gleaming as I walked up to him. He seemed to already know the question I was going to ask. The tom opened his mouth, but immediately closed it again, his eyes then narrowing.

"As much as I would like to think that you would do well in battle, Swiftpaw," he began, "I just wonder if it's too early for you; you're

only a quarter moon into training. I'd hate to send you into battle if you weren't ready..."

But I am! I pleaded inside. I decided to take my chances. "I see why you'd be worried," I meowed, trying to hide my extreme eagerness, "But I *do* feel ready!"

Foxleap snorted. "Even though that may be true, I know for a fact that almost any apprentice would insist on that..." he muttered, his gaze turning towards Firestar, who was on the Highledge talking to Brambleclaw and Ivypaw. After staring for a few heartbeats, he turned his head back to me. "I'll tell you what, once Firestar is done talking to those two, I'll take that chance to tell him about your great training session today. If he likes what he hears, I'll let him decide to send you into battle."

I then felt a huge surge of excitement. Nodding quickly, I meowed eagerly, "That works for me!"

Foxleap smiled and then licked my ear. "I'll let you know," he murmured before padding over to talk to Icecloud.

I sat down where I was, bewildered at the fact that I might be fighting in a battle tomorrow. *That's* crazy! *Foxleap really meant what he said!* Digging my claws into the ground ambitiously, I then thought, *we'll get that territory back and show ShadowClan who's boss!*

My gaze then went up to where Firestar was still talking to Brambleclaw and Ivypaw. *I wonder why StarClan chose Ivypaw to pass on this sign...?*

Suddenly, right then and there, something hit me. Not something physical, but a realization.

Is it possible... that it wasn't StarClan that passed on this information? My thoughts then thought about Tigerstar's words all over again. *He had said he was talking to a ThunderClan apprentice about something important. What if it was Ivypaw? She trains in the Dark Forest, I know that.*

My heart felt like it was going to explode as I put more pieces

together. *This is an issue that affects the Clans, as Tigerstar said it was, and that I'd find out about it soon...*

I tried my hardest to suppress a hiss. *Is this the* Dark Forest's *doing?* I asked myself. *If so, why? What is Tigerstar up to?*

I took a deep breath, trying to calm down. *If Ivypaw agreed to it, it must be something that needs to be done, right?*

But, as I traveled over to the apprentice's den for a quick nap before I'd have to wake up in the Dark Forest later at moonhigh, I couldn't be so sure.

I wondered if this battle should even be happening.

Chapter 27

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

I had been awake for a while, but I wasn't doing anything about it.

I had woken up from my sleep a little past moonhigh, and I couldn't fall back asleep. For what had felt like moons, I just lied in my nest on my side, looking out at the disappearing moon. I was dreading the dawn ahead of me.

It had felt like moons since I had walked into a battle, and that was probably literally the case. *The last time I was in any sort of combat with another cat was when I killed Ashfur,* I realized. *I hope I don't get as carried away this time...*

As the moon finally completely disappeared behind the trees, I heard cats begin to stir in their nest. By their swift and quick movements, I could tell they were eager to face the potential battle ahead.

As many cats began to crawl out of the den, I finally pushed myself to stand up, stretch, and then follow everyone out of the warriors den. Many cats were gathered near the camp entrance, Firestar standing closest, ready to lead his Clan to the border they were fighting for.

I let out a small huff and shook my head slowly as I began to pad over to join everyone else. *Great StarClan, how I wish that we could've established all of this peacefully.*

I had a really bad feeling. I wasn't sure why. I hadn't said anything to Firestar, and I wouldn't dare do so, but I wondered if we could've taken more time to figure this out, rather than leap into battle based on an apprentice's supposed sign.

But it sure isn't like Firestar to send his Clan into battle when it isn't

needed. It must be important. I have to trust him.

I took a deep breath and released, almost as if to let go of the anxious thoughts I was having, before settling down next to Foxleap and Icecloud.

I decided that I really needed to strike a conversation with someone, otherwise I would freak myself out so much that I would back out of the battle. I nudged Foxleap on the shoulder to get his attention. "Hello, there!" I meowed, trying to suppress the "shake" in my voice.

Foxleap and Icecloud immediately turned to me, their eyes bright. *I wish I could look like that right now...*

"Hi, Goldenshine!" Icecloud purred. "Are you ready for this?"

I hesitated, truly not sure if I *was* ready for this. "Well, I-"

"I am!" Foxleap meowed, cutting me off. I was almost glad he did. A glimmer of humor in his eyes, he then muttered, "It's been a while since I've tasted ShadowClan blood."

"Great StarClan, Foxleap!" Icecloud exclaimed, flicking her brother's ear. "Your name may be Foxleap, but you're certainly not a fox!"

I managed to let out a purr of amusement. "If cat blood is what you want, you might as well go live with the foxes and join in their schemes!"

Just to my luck, just as I was beginning to let my worries fly away like a chaffinch, Firestar gave the yowl to signal that it was time to head out into the forest. As cats began to crawl through the camp entrance, I trailed behind Foxleap and Icecloud, my head facing the ground.

Foxdung, foxdung, foxdung... I kept cursing to myself as my vision was then taken over by the several bushes and trees of ThunderClan territory. *Foxdung, foxdung...*

I then shook my head quickly. *Maybe not fighting in so long and becoming a queen has made you soft*, I thought.

I then couldn't suppress a snort. *What are you doing?* I asked myself. *Swiftpaw is an apprentice now, and I'm a* warrior *again!* Filled with a new hope, I then realized, *this battle is exactly what I need.*

Feeling a little more optimistic, or as optimistic as one could be before going into battle, I lifted my head up and trotted a little faster. *I'm ready to fight for my Clan.*

Suddenly, I was bowled over by another cat. My heartbeat immediately skipped. *What's happening? Are we in ShadowClan territory and we haven't realized it?* But, when I saw the cat who had managed to pin me to the ground, I immediately calmed down.

"Dusty, you mouse-brain!" I hissed, batting his face with a sheathed paw. "You scared me out of my fur!"

Dusty immediately backed off of me, his blue eyes glittering with amusement. "Now is no time to be scared out of your fur, Goldenshine!" He purred. "What if I had been a ShadowClan warrior?"

I smirked and narrowed my eyes as I got down, prepping to pounce. "If that was the case, then I'd shred you to bits!" I meowed before leaping back onto Dusty.

"Calm down, you two!" Pippy's voice mewed from behind me. I turned my head to see her approaching us, her head shaking slowly. "You're going to wear yourself out before the battle even starts!"

New rushes of adrenaline running through me, I whipped around to face Pippy. "A journey all around the world couldn't wear me out now!" I purred, almost feeling like an apprentice going into their first battle, just as Dusty and Pippy were.

Remembering this, I looked back and forth from Dusty to Pippy with wide eyes. They eventually landed on Pippy. "You're thinking pretty sensibly for your first battle!" I teased, my eyes narrowing.

Pippy seemed genuinely flattered by my praise. She lifted her tail up in the air, her eyes gleaming. "Why shouldn't I be? I'm a ThunderClan apprentice going into battle! I have to be at my best

right now."

I have to be at my best right now. Pippy's words couldn't be more true, and they only added to the enthusiasm I had been trying to work up in myself.

I nodded, my gray eyes glittering thoughtfully at Pippy, before turning to Dusty and meowing with laughter in my voice, "*You* on the other hand..."

Dusty then rolled his eyes, but before he could give another teasing response, I cut him off, speaking more seriously, "Are going to be great as well."

Dusty's eyes lit up at my comment, and as he and Pippy padded up to walk with me, I was overwhelmed with pride for the two former kittypets. They had come so far, and besides their lingering Twoleg den scent, I would see them and think of them as any regular ThunderClan cats.

Pippy had undoubtable spirit. If Firestar walked up to her and told her to go out into ThunderClan territory and catch twenty pieces of prey within half of a day, she would do everything in her power to make sure that it happened. She also had incredible positivity, which I knew would help to get her through any adversity.

Any cat would agree that Dusty is a natural-born warrior. He is determined, strong, and *selfless*. He would defend ThunderClan to his death if he needed to. *StarClan forbid*, I thought. It still made my heart well up when I thought about how he had thrown himself at the fox when he saw Swiftpaw in danger. At that point, Dusty didn't even know many cats in the Clan well yet, but he had been willing to give his life for one.

He's... he's a one of a kind cat, I thought, feeling more and more warm the more I thought about how amazing the dusty-gray tom was.

"What?"

Suddenly, Dusty's voice managed to break into my thoughts. I shook

my head quickly and then let my eyes adjust again. Dusty was staring back at me.

"What do you mean, what?" I asked, tilting my head.

To my surprise, a small smile emerged on Dusty's face. "Well... you were staring at me."

Shoot! I thought. *This isn't the first time he's caught me doing this.*

I didn't know how to cover for it.

If you had given me another few seasons, I'd maybe be able to come up with something.

All I could manage to say was, "Sorry." Immediately after, I knew that had been quite a stupid thing to say. *Sorry for looking at you, because you're amazing? Yep, that makes a whole lot of sense. Good job.*

I then felt Dusty's muzzle touch my cheek, and I could hear a purr rumbling in his throat. "No need to be sorry," he whispered, still purring. He pulled away and then meowed shyly, "It's not like I don't sneak a look at you every once in a while..."

I was then overwhelmed with warmth, and before I could say anything else, I heard a meow from the head of the group, "Hold the line!" I peered over to see that it had been Lionblaze that had spoken.

"I thought I heard something," I heard Blossomfall protest.

"Get back in line!" Firestar then growled. "Stay inside of our border."

Without me even realizing it, we had made it to the ShadowClan border, and were now lying in wait. Cats around me were beginning to swarm and stir, clearly ready to face what would appear on the other side of the border.

I'm ready for this. I told myself, actually feeling like I was, finally. *I'm ready for this.*

Suddenly, I felt fur brush against mine, and I looked to my side to see that Foxleap had trotted past me, and he stopped by Swiftpaw, who was a couple of tail lengths in front of me. They then bent their heads closely together. It seemed that Foxleap was giving Swiftpaw some last minute tips before going into the battle.

I couldn't believe that Swiftpaw was even going into battle in the first place. But, both Foxleap and Firestar had thought that he was ready. Apparently he had been doing *extremely* well with his hunting and battle training. Foxleap had even said that it would be a *waste* not to use him in battle.

As any cat would expect of a mother, I was very nervous for him. I trusted Foxleap's word, but I was praying to StarClan that Swiftpaw wouldn't get himself seriously hurt.

I'll shred *any cat that tries to take it too far with him.*

I then became very alert as our group of ThunderClan cats suddenly fell eerily silent. All that could be heard were the new set of footsteps emerging from the other side of the border. Without even realizing that I was, I pressed my flank against Dusty's. He didn't pull away, to my luck.

I peered over the crowd once more, and immediately as I did I wished I hadn't, as I saw Blackstar emerge into the clearing, flanked by Rowanclaw and Russetfur.

Here we go.

"You have made your choice," Blackstar snarled. "You *gave* us this territory. It's not yours to take back."

"It is if what is given wasn't used properly," Dusty hissed into my ear. I gave him a small nod before turning back to the confrontation that was unfolding.

"We have given you a chance to avoid fighting," Firestar meowed proudly. "Even now, no blood needs to be shed."

I couldn't suppress a shiver as I then saw Blackstar's lips begin to curl into a snarl.

"Blood will fall, and every drop of it will be on your conscience."

Chapter 28

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

Immediately after Blackstar's words, his ShadowClan warriors leaped at us, and the battle had begun.

There wasn't time for me to be scared at all. The adrenaline was rushing through me, and I knew I had to jump into the battle and fight for my Clan, no matter how worried I was that my battle moves may be rusty, or my strength might not be up to par.

At least I knew I was far beyond my days of actually *fainting* after a battle, like I had *shamefully* done in the eclipse battle many moons ago.

Some cats in ThunderClan still hadn't let me live that down, unfortunately.

Like I said, now was not the time to let things like that get to me. I pursued the first cat I saw that had a ShadowClan scent. After giving them a single swipe across the muzzle, I then proceeded to pin them down.

I then met the green eyes of who I knew to be Tawnypelt; Brambleclaw's sister who had left ThunderClan seasons ago to be with her father. She had gone on the sun-drown place journey and was known to be one of ShadowClan's toughest fighters and most dedicated warriors.

I certainly didn't let that get to me, though. I sunk one of my claws into the tortoiseshell she-cat's shoulder, and used my other paw to give her a few rakes to the belly. Before Tawnypelt could even attempt to kick me off of her, I confused her a little bit by rolling to my side, making sure I picked myself up immediately.

I tried to swipe at Tawnypelt again, but she ducked her head down

and then leaped into my flank. I fell over with her push, and she was able to rake her claws deeply into my flank. I couldn't suppress a yowl of pain, and for a moment I felt helpless to fight back.

Then, suddenly, I watched as another cat jumped into my sight and managed to bowl over Tawnypelt, and I felt her claws disappear and become detached from my side. I lifted my head up to see that Swiftpaw had saved me from a potentially serious injury. He had Tawnypelt pinned down once again and was raking at her side. Although she was down on the ground, I could tell that it wouldn't be for long.

Swiftpaw can't fight Tawnypelt *all by himself!* I realized before running up to help him.

Side by side, Swiftpaw and I swiped at Tawnypelt several times, our movements matching more and more with each swipe.

Eventually, as Tawnypelt was weakening, she let out a long hiss, turned around and then limped away. Swiftpaw and I exchanged a triumphant glance before he almost immediately leaped back into the battle.

I shook my head slowly in amazement. *You'd think Swiftpaw had been fighting in battles for seasons!* I thought. *He's going to be one of ThunderClan's fiercest fighters, I can see it now.*

As I was about to run back into the battle, I paused as realized how deeply past the border, the border we were fighting over, that ThunderClan was. The battle was practically happening *in* ThunderClan territory.

This is the opposite of what is supposed to happen!

I moved my head quickly around the clearing, seeing if there was any chance that ThunderClan had already begun to make any advances, and to my luck, I noticed Brambleclaw talking to Thornclaw and Brackenfur a little ways from the fighting.

Desperate to see if a solution was being created, I ran as quickly as I could over to them, making sure no ShadowClan cat's claws met my

fur in the meantime.

Once I arrived over to them, Brambleclaw had disappeared, and Brackenfur and Thornclaw were speaking to Toadstep, Foxleap, Swiftpaw, Ivypaw and Dovepaw.

"Brambleclaw wants us to try something different," Brackenfur was meowing when I arrived.

"What is it?" I asked the golden tom, unsheathing my claws and digging them into the hard earth.

Thornclaw kept his gaze on the fighting cats as he spoke. "ShadowClan keeps regrouping. They're pushing us back across the field."

Toadstep, looking frustrated, muttered through his teeth, "It's impossible to get a good grip on this grass."

"Brambleclaw wants us to outflank them," Brackenfur meowed sharply.

That might be a good idea... I thought.

"How?" Ivypaw asked, her blue eyes wide.

Thornclaw finally turned his gaze back to the ThunderClan cats who had been gathered. "I'm going to lead a separate patrol," he responded, "and try to draw ShadowClan away from the clearing, back into their own territory."

My heart seemed to well up with pride as Thornclaw spoke. *That's my awesome mate,* I thought to myself proudly. I shook it off immediately though, knowing quite well that we needed to go through with Brambleclaw's plan as soon as possible.

Brackenfur picked up on his brother's words. "We stand a better chance in the woods. There are brambles and trees," he pointed out. "The ground will feel more familiar. And we can try out our new tree tactics."

"But won't ShadowClan just fight harder if we invade their

territory?" Swiftpaw asked, his eyes filled with determination.

Heh, it's almost like he wants *ShadowClan to fight harder.*

Brackenfur's amber gaze darkened. "That's a risk we'll have to take," he murmured. "We'll never beat them out here in the open."

"I agree," I mewed. "What we're doing now isn't working. I think our only option now *is* to take a risk."

As I had been speaking, Toadstep arrived back to our separate patrol with Rosepetal, Sorreltail and Lionblaze following behind him. Thornclaw nodded to the four of them and then turned to the rest of us. "Let's go," he hissed, then proceeding to walk side by side with Brackenfur towards ShadowClan territory. I warily followed them, paranoid that we were going to be penalized for doing so within heartbeats, and that we wouldn't be able to even go through with the plan.

But luckily, we made it past the border without any attacks but did hear some very clear yowls of protest. Just as I was beginning to think the plan was going to fail already, I suddenly noticed Thornclaw passing on a message to each cat on the patrol.

When he got to me, he hissed into my ear, "The patrol is going to climb up these trees and attack from above, while Lionblaze and I will stay down here."

"I gotcha," I whispered back. But, before I leapt up the nearest tree, I paused and turned back to Thornclaw, tapping his shoulder with my tail to catch his attention. When his gaze met mine, I whispered as quickly as I could, "*Please* be careful. I am *not* losing you again."

Thornclaw's gaze softened. "I will," he whispered back. "You be careful too. *Please*."

I nodded quickly, and then lashed my tail in order to gesture towards the battle ahead. "Now *go,*" I muttered before beginning to climb up the tree I had chosen.

Soon after I had taken my spot quite a few branches up, I saw Blackstar burst from the battle to stand in front of where Thornclaw

and Lionblaze were standing.

"Can't you even respect the border you just made?" He hissed as he swiped his head around quickly.

"Where are the rest of you?" He demanded. I felt a nervous pang in my stomach as I saw his warriors quickly gather behind him, all of them bristling with aggression.

Then, to my surprise, I watched as Lionblaze's gaze went up to our patrol hiding up in the trees. Blackstar's gaze followed, and as his eyes widened, Thornclaw gave the signal to attack.

"Now!"

Not being able to hesitate, as much as I wanted to, I leaped out of the tree. The first ShadowClan cat that I saw was Owlclaw. As I landed, I was able to bowl him over. Unfortunately, immediately after, Dovepaw landed from her tree and knocked me over.

Foxdung! I cursed to myself. *Be careful!*

Luckily, the both of us were able to get ourselves together and get up immediately. We exchanged a quick glance and then we both leaped at Owlclaw. Dovepaw nipped at his leg while I raked at his flank. Eventually, Rosepetal pitched in to help us, and in no time, Owlclaw was running away as fast as he could, hissing in pain.

We're really getting into the battle now! I thought excitedly. After that, I managed to chase away a couple more ShadowClan warriors.

For a moment, I was actually able to scan the clearing, and it began to look as if the battle was calming down. In the distance, I could see Dusty and Pippy almost at the heart of the battle. I was overwhelmed with pride once again as I saw how skillfully they were fighting the ShadowClan warriors. *They're going to be warriors any day now,* I realized. I then noticed my daughter, Goldenshine slashing at a ShadowClan warrior at Dusty's side. I couldn't suppress a small smile as I saw the two of them. *They do really well together.*

But, my satisfaction immediately went away as I saw that tail lengths away, Firestar was battling one-on-one with Russetfur.

Firestar let out a yowl full of pain as Russetfur bit at his throat. I could see the ginger tom trying to fight back, but it clearly wasn't doing him any good.

No! I thought anxiously, about ready to throw myself back into the battle to save my leader. *Russetfur is going to kill him!*

My heart nearly seemed to stop as Firestar then went completely limp. But, as quickly as anything I had ever seen in my life, I saw Lionblaze then leap at Russetfur. He hauled her off of the ThunderClan leader, and as Lionblaze fell off to the side, Russetfur fell back on him, seemingly lifeless.

I was baffled. *Lionblaze barely touched her!* I was even more confused as I then heard a ShadowClan cat yowl, "You *killed* Russetfur!"

I looked over to Lionblaze to see him looking as shocked as I was. "I d-didn't do anything!"

Before Lionblaze could defend himself anymore, I saw Blackstar practically throw himself on Russetfur, calling her name over and over. As he shook her with his big black paws, Russetfur didn't stir at all.

Lionblaze did *kill her!* I realized, my mouth dropping. *How in the name of StarClan...?*

"Enough!" I heard Thornclaw hiss from behind me, interrupting my bewildered thoughts. I whipped around to see him shaking Ratscar off of his back and practically tossing him to the side. "The battle is won. The clearing is ours. Do you concede or shall we fight for it again?"

My stomach twisted with apprehension as I turned my head towards Blackstar, whose eyes were practically burning with hatred.

"Take it," the black and white tom hissed. "It was never worth the blood that has been spilled here today."

As I looked around the clearing, I realized that Blackstar's words could not have been more true.

My heart sank as I saw ShadowClan cats beginning to gather around Russetfur's dead body. As if that wasn't enough, I then heard Sorreltail's dismayed yowl come from behind me.

"Firestar!"

I felt my heard drop as I could sense the fear in the tortoiseshell she-cat's voice. I whipped around once again to see cats beginning to gather around the ThunderClan leader.

He wasn't moving at all.

No!

"What's wrong?" Sandstorm meowed worriedly as she appeared into my view.

"He's losing a life," Sorreltail answered, lowering her head.

I lowered my head as well as I thought to myself, my mind spiraling as it had many times in the past moons. *Was this battle a complete mistake? We've lost a Clan deputy, and one of the lives of our ThunderClan leaders*.

I found myself getting increasingly more anxious and angry. *What if Ivypaw was wrong? What if this wasn't supposed to happen? What if we should have left ShadowClan alone?*

But we would never know if she was.

We would never know if this was meant to be.

And, we *hadn't* left ShadowClan alone.

Instead, we had leaped into a battle based on an apprentice's dream.

The battle was *definitely* over, and ThunderClan had won, but it felt as if nothing had been resolved.

Chapter 29

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

I struggled to catch my breath as I watched Spiderleg and Birchfall drag Firestar's limp body away from Russetfur's corpse, which was beginning to be picked up by Blackstar's warriors to be taken back to their camp. Jayfeather, with Leafpool to assist, were tending to as many cats as they could.

Luckily, I only had minor injuries, and if any medicine cat attempted to care for me, I had already planned on sending them to somebody else.

I almost felt guilty that I wasn't badly hurt. The battle, unfortunately, had been an incredibly one with lots of bloodshed, and there weren't many cats that only had minor injuries.

Realizing this, I thought that maybe I should help out the medicine cats where I could. Jayfeather was just a few tail lengths from me, so I started traveling to him as soon as he caught my sight.

It's not likely he'll give me any direction, though, but I might as well try.

He was tending to Brackenfur when I arrived to his spot. "Hey, Jayfeather. Is there anything at all I can help with?"

Jayfeather, as I expected, didn't look up from his work. But to my surprise, he muttered, "Sure. Leafpool and I have got the cats with major injuries, but if there's any cat walking around with open wounds or gashes, you can dab some cobwebs on them. I'll deal with them further once we're back at camp."

"No problem!" I mewed to the medicine cat. "I'm on it."

Jayfeather lightly flicked his ears, I think as a gesture of gratitude, and then I turned away to start looking for cobwebs I could gather.

I trotted over to a bramble bush with an ample amount on it, wove it together, and padded into the crowd of injured cats.

The first cat that caught my eye was Swiftpaw, who was licking at a small gash he had on one of his front legs. He had a couple of scratches on his flank, but they didn't worry me at all, and I knew they wouldn't worry Jayfeather either.

I was overwhelmed with relief. *My son made it through his first battle almost completely clean of injuries!* I thought happily. *That's all a mother of an apprentice can really ask for.*

Swiftpaw lashed his tail when he saw me approaching him. His eyes widened as they fell on an injury on my flank. "You're hurt!" He exclaimed.

I rolled my eyes and snorted. "It's just one little scratch," I reassured my son. "And hey," I meowed, starting to dab my wad of cobweb on Swiftpaw's leg, "I'm the mother here. Let me worry about *you*!"

Swiftpaw let out a long sigh, almost as if to try and release his pain, as I tried to stop his bleeding. "I can't believe I just fought in my first battle," he breathed. "I've dreamed about fighting in a battle, well... since I had the ability *to* dream!"

I'm so proud of him, and he's only in his first quarter moon of his apprenticeship. I also was incredibly happy that he had seemed to have gotten past the weird patch of time where he constantly seemed so irritable and sleep-deprived. I was hoping one of those spells would never happen again. Now, he was as chipper as any other new apprentice I had seen.

I had been purring as Swiftpaw was speaking. "And you fought incredibly well," I commented. "Your mentor will be so proud of you."

Swiftpaw lifted his head in pride. "I'd like to think I've given him a reason to!"

"Oh, hush!" I meowed, laughter in my voice. "So, is Foxleap just that great of a mentor, or is someone else secretly teaching you all of

your battle moves?" I asked, teasingly.

The teasing didn't seem to hit the right nerve with Swiftpaw though, or *something* went wrong, as I felt my son suddenly tense up. I looked up from my cobwebs to see Swiftpaw staring straight ahead, his gray-black eyes wide.

"What?" I asked nervously. "Is your wound hurting you?"

All of the sudden, Swiftpaw seemed to be in another world. I felt if I were to cut his tail off, he wouldn't be phased.

I finally decided to wave my tail in front of Swiftpaw's face in an attempt to catch his attention. "*Hey!*" I said a little more loudly. "What's wrong?"

Swiftpaw then seemed to be snatched from his thoughts. His head snapped in my direction, and I felt a nervous pang as I saw his eyes flashing with anger. "*Nothing's* wrong!" He growled. "Why would you think some other cat is training me?"

I opened my mouth to speak, but initially no words would come out. "What are you talking about?" I finally managed to get out. Gathering myself a little bit more, I then meowed defensively, "I was *joking!*"

Swiftpaw let out a hiss and turned his head away from me. "Whatever," he muttered. He looked down to the injury on his leg. Without looking up at me, he then meowed. "My wound will be fine. Go tend to the others."

I let out a small grunt and narrowed my eyes at the gray-black tom. "Alright then," I murmured. Turning away from my son, I called back, "Get Jayfeather or Leafpool if it starts bleeding again."

Behind me, I heard Swiftpaw let out a long sigh and then begin to pad towards ThunderClan territory.

As I padded over to Sorreltail to calm a gash on her shoulder, I tried to process what had just happened. *I know Swiftpaw to be snappy, that's for sure... but what was his deal?* I wondered. *He was talking so excitedly about the battle, and then all of the sudden he was growling at*

me.

I felt my shoulders sink as a new thought crossed my mind. *Is there something he's not telling me?* I unsheathed the claws on the paw that wasn't tending to Sorreltail. *What if it has something to do with his weird moods or the fox attack?*

StarClan forbid.

Not being able to fathom the fact that my son might be keeping a secret from me, I shook my head quickly and tried to focus on Sorreltail's shoulder.

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It was the moonhigh after the battle at dawn, and despite how late it was, the ThunderClan camp was still stirring. Border and hunting patrols were going in and out, keeping cats supplemented with fresh-kill, as well as making sure our new border was there to stay.

Since the Clan had returned to camp, I had spent most of the day assisting Jayfeather and Leafpool, making sure that as many cats as possible were being healed as quickly as possible. Jayfeather had actually been keeping me pretty busy for the whole day, and besides Swiftpaw, I hadn't been able to talk to any cat about the battle.

I had just finished dabbing some cobweb on a wound of Brambleclaw's that had reopened when I had begun to travel back to the medicine den to see what I needed to do next. Before I made it inside, I paused as I saw Dusty crawl out of the den. My heart immediately began to beat faster as I met his gaze.

"Hey!" I mewed kindly. "What were you doing in there? Are you badly hurt?"

Dusty purred and shook his head. "No, I was checking on Pippy," he murmured, his blue eyes suddenly darkening.

I sighed and looked down to the ground. "I hate that she had to be injured so badly in her first battle..." I meowed with a sigh.
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Although Pippy had fought fiercely in the battle, that had caused her to gain a lot of injuries. She ended being one of the first cats Jayfeather had to treat, otherwise, StarClan knows what would've happened.

Luckily, she already seemed to be doing a little better, but Jayfeather had said that she would need to be in the medicine den overnight.

Dusty nodded in agreement as I had spoken. "Me too. She was so brave!" He purred, seeming to lighten up a little bit.

Suddenly welling up with pride, I took a step closer to Dusty. "So were you," I purred back. "ThunderClan is lucky to have you two."

"I was lucky to be able to fight beside you," Dusty whispered, his eyes sparkling. Flattered, I thought of what I should say back, but I stopped myself as I noticed that it seemed like Dusty wanted to say something else. He looked down to the ground, hesitated, and then looked back up at me, smiling with his pale blue eyes sparkling. We stared into each other's eyes for a while before Dusty mururmed, "Goldenshine, I-"

"Goldenshine!"

I clenched my teeth in annoyance as I heard Jayfeather's yowl come from the inside of the medicine den. Overwhelmed with disappointment, I met Dusty's eyes once again, his gaze reflecting what I felt, but I also noticed a bit of happiness there. "Go help, Jayfeather, Goldenshine," he meowed kindly. As he began to pad towards Mousewhisker, who was a couple foxlengths away, he meowed softly, "We'll talk later."

I watched him go for a few heartbeats before trotting quickly into the medicine den to see what Jayfeather wanted. I crawled in to find the den still pretty crowded, but luckily not as much so as it had been at sunhigh. Jayfeather was treating Firestar when I approached him.

"What's up?" I asked, nodding briefly to Firestar who, thank StarClan, had woken up and had begun to recover pretty quickly

after losing his life.

"I need you to go out into the forest and get me some more cobwebs and marigold," Jayfeather commanded. "We're going through them extremely quickly.

"Sure thing, O great one," I purred, dipping my head teasingly. "I almost feel like your apprentice!"

Jayfeather snorted. "*StarClan forbid*," he muttered. "If that ever happened, I think I'd lose my mind within heartbeats."

"Oh, whatever," I purred with amusement as I turned around and left the medicine den. Knowing that Jayfeather and Leafpool would need their cobwebs and marigold as soon as possible, I practically ran out of camp and into the forest.

After a bit of searching, I finally found some cobwebs and gathered as many as I could.

As I began to search for some marigold, I realized I was getting some time to think. My head still felt light and seemed to be swirling since I had talked to Dusty just moments ago.

I mean, almost every conversation we had left me wondering what was to come of our friendship. *Or... potentially, relationship?* But I felt like I could wonder for days what Dusty had been about to say to me before Jayfeather had called me into the medicine den.

Great StarClan, Jayfeather, I thought frustratedly, *if you had just only realized your need a few heartbeats later than you did...*

Letting out a quiet hiss, I then began to reflect on my feelings. *It's not like I'd be* that *frustrated if any other tom had been about to say something to me and was interrupted,* I realized as my eyes caught sight of some marigold, and as I began to gather it, I delved deeper into what I was thinking about.

I always get so excited when I see Dusty, and I would never, ever get tired of being with him even if we were trapped in a fox den for seasons. I admire him so much. He's so kind, dedicated, comforting, adorable... I then narrowed my eyes and paused what I was doing. *Do I maybe...?*

I let out a huff and shook my head quickly. *Calm down. Dusty literally could've have been just about to tell me that there was a leaf on my ear or something.* I ran my paws over my ears to check, and let out a small purr of amusement. *Well, if it wasn't that, it was probably something else that is no big deal at all.*

Trying to keep myself from making things more cryptic than they were, I grabbed a bit more marigold and then began to trot quickly back to camp. *Nevertheless, Dusty does seem to flirt with me a lot*, I realized. *Not that I'm complaining... at all. But I could just be looking into all of it too much. Then again, Breezepelt, my former mate, thought that something was going on. Ugh, I don't know.*

I sighed once more as I crawled through the gorse tunnel, back into ThunderClan camp. *Despite how strong my feelings are for Dusty... I'm not going to let my hopes rise too much.*

Telling myself I needed to focus on anything but the moment I had had with Dusty, I burst back into the medicine den to give Jayfeather and Leafpool their cobwebs and marigold.

"It's about time!" Jayfeather hissed, snatching the herbs as I placed them on the ground.

"Thank you, Goldenshine," Leafpool meowed more kindly, shooting a teasing but annoying glance at her son. "You have been such a big help."

"I was glad to," I purred, smiling at the tabby-and-white she-cat. *Jayfeather and Leafpool work so well together*, I thought. *I really hope Leafpool earns her medicine cat position back some day.*

"Yeah... thanks, I guess," Jayfeather muttered. "I think you've done all you need to today. Get some rest."

I yawned as Jayfeather had spoken. "I will," I responded. "I sure do need it."

Giving one last lash of the tail in farewell to the two medicine cats, I turned around and left the den. *I am exhausted.*

As I traveled through camp, I found my gaze looking towards the

apprentice's den, where Swiftpaw and Snowpaw were talking together. Swiftpaw looked as if he was the happiest he had ever been, and that he hadn't ever lashed at me earlier. *He seems completely okay now...* I realized. *I still don't understand what could have set him off so suddenly.*

Too tired to think at all anymore, I let out another yawn and crawled into the warrior's den. Looking at the many empty nests made me realize how many cats probably weren't going to be filling those nests throughout the whole night. I picked out one of the many vacant nests, walked in a circle a few times, and finally was able to lie down comfortably in the moss.

I was stirring in my nest when suddenly a strange voice caught my attention. At first, what was being said was completely incomprehensible. I screwed my eyes and then proceeded to open them. I lifted up my head and looked around the warriors den.

"Did someone say something?" I whispered just loudly enough for any cat in the den to hear.

Many cats were asleep, so it probably wasn't any of them. *I don't know of any cats that talk in their sleep...* I then saw Cloudtail stir and lift up his head. "Wasn't me, Goldenshine!" He whispered back to me. "Honestly, after this morning, *all* of us will probably be hearing voices!"

I let out a quiet purr of amusement, laughing at myself a little bit. "You're right," I meowed, setting my head back down. "I'm so tired that I'm probably just hearing things."

I whispered goodnight to the white tom and then closed my eyes once again, thinking that the whispers would disappear.

But they didn't.

Unfortunately, this time, I was able to hear some words.

Revenge... preparation... your fault... get ready...

As I was able to make out the words, my heart began to beat faster and faster. *Get ready...* the voice said again.

Get ready? I repeated to myself. As I was about to let myself become overwhelmed with anxiety, I forced my eyes open again and shook my head quickly. *I'm so drained that my mind is practically going crazy. Go to sleep.*

Finally, the voices seemed to go away as I shut my eyes one last time and finally, I was able to fall asleep, ready to get past all of the events of today.

Chapter 30

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather beneath the Highledge!"

Firestar's yowl was the first thing I heard when I woke up. I lifted my head up to see that the warriors den was nearly empty. I turned around and saw that dawn was long gone, and sunhigh was fast approaching.

Feeling quite well-rested, I was able to spring right out of my nest, take a stretch, and trot quickly out of the warriors den and into camp, where the cats of ThunderClan were already beginning to gather.

It was the morning after the battle; a full day since the battle had taken place. But thank StarClan, things were already beginning to look up.

Almost every cat was as fully recovered as they could be, considering the battle had only taken place yesterday. Many cats had been able to return to the warriors den throughout the night. It looked as if even Firestar had recovered quite quickly from losing his life. He had stayed in the medicine den all night, but apparently he felt well enough to call a Clan meeting!

I wonder how busy the medicine den is currently? I wondered. I decided to take a quick peek in their before the Clan meeting began. Scanning the camp and the gathering cats to make sure I had sufficient time, I ran quickly over to Jayfeather's den. As I was about to enter, I nearly bumped into another cat.

"Whoa!" I exclaimed before backing away. "Sorry about that!" I then shook my head quickly as I realized who I had almost ran into.

"Pippy!" I exclaimed happily, touching my nose to hers. "You're okay! Are you out of the medicine den for good?"

Pippy gave me a large smile and rolled her big green eyes. "Not for *good*, I'm sure!" She purred, looking down at her flank that had a fresh poultice rubbed on it. "They're letting me out for a bit, but I'm going to be back to see how this is doing soon enough!"

I let out a sigh of relief. "Well, I'm just glad that you're doing so much better already!" I mewed. "I... I was hoping your first battle wouldn't go to nothing..."

Pippy's gaze darkened as she looked down to the ground. "Me too..." then her eyes immediately lit back up. "But they didn't! At least I can say that I fought the hardest that I could!"

I smiled back at the former-kittypet. "That you can!" I meowed with a hint of laughter in my voice.

"Anyway, do you know what this Clan meeting is about?" Pippy asked, tilting her head.

Actually having no idea, I answered, "It could be a multitude of things! Dealing with the aftermath of the battle, probably."

"Well, whatever it is, I can't wait!" Pippy exclaimed, hopping up and down like a kit. "You coming?"

"Yeah! I was just going to check in on the medicine den really quickly."

"Okay! When you're done, come sit by me!"

"Sure thing!"

After giving Pippy a farewell nod, I slid into the medicine den to see what was going on. I felt a major wave of ease as I saw only a few cats left in nests. I also couldn't suppress a small smile as I saw Leafpool still working with Jayfeather.

I can't imagine poor Jayfeather dealing with a battle like this all by himself! I realized. *Leafpool is such a lifesaver.*

"How is everything going in here?" I asked, padding up to the two working cats.

"Hm. More annoying, now that you're here," Jayfeather muttered, rolling his blind eyes.

"We're just fine, Goldenshine. Thank you!" Leafpool purred, shooting Jayfeather a half annoyed, half humored glance. "We've appreciated your help."

Letting out an amused grunt, I followed Leafpool's glance. "Well, at least *you* do, Leafpool, I think," I joked, tapping Jayfeather on the shoulder with my tail, teasingly.

Leafpool shook her head slowly, still looking at her son. "Oh, don't listen to anything he says," she murmured. "There's appreciation for all of the things you've done down there somewhere!" Jayfeather simply shook his head slowly and snorted.

"Heh, I believe you," I purred, wrapping my tail around the gray tabby tom's back as I was suddenly overwhelmed with gratitude. "He may be a quick-tempered little furball, but I think I'd call him a friend."

As crazy as it probably sounded, it was true. Any cat could agree that making a friend out of Jayfeather was an incredibly difficult thing to do, but I think I had managed to do it to some extent. Our personalities were *completely* opposing, but despite that, the two of us had been there for each other through quite a lot already, and I was sure that we would almost *have* to get along to some degree, considering the two of us were dealing with the whole Snowflight reincarnation situation.

I suppose Snowflight and her death, as much as I hate to say it, is bringing us together a bit, I realized. *The next time I see her, I don't know if I'll want to thank her or scratch her eyes out for that.*

After I had spoken, Jayfeather let out a small hiss and took a step away from me. "Gross. I'd rather be friends with a ball of moss," he muttered. "It'd be less likely to make my head explode."

"Right, sure," I purred, flicking Jayfeather on the ear before turning around to leave the den. "See you later!"

"Count on that - I'll need an herb collector again," Jayfeather called from inside the den.

I paused for a moment and turned my head back towards the medicine den. "Ha! You appreciate me, admit it!"

"Shut up."

I let out a *mrrow* of laughter as I finally joined the crowd of ThunderClan cats that had gathered around the Highledge and settled down next to Pippy.

I really do wonder what this meeting is about, I thought. *I guess I'm just glad that Firestar is feeling well enough to hold one!*

As I was about to turn to Pippy to start a conversation, I felt a light tap on my shoulder, and I turned my head to see the familiar, but striking blue eyes of Dusty.

"Hello, there," he purred, touching noses with me and his sister before settling down on my other side.

"Hey!" I purred back as I watched him sit down, practically shivering with anticipation. *Should I ask him about what he was about to say last night?* I asked myself. Letting myself go off of the adrenaline rush I was feeling, I began to speak. "Hey, Dusty..."

"Yeah, what's up?" The dusty-gray tom asked, an inquiring look on his face.

Here we go, here we go. I took and deep breath and closed my eyes before speaking. "So-"

But unfortunately, that's as far as that conversation was able to go, as Firestar *of course* began to speak to ThunderClan at that very moment. *Foxdung. Another time, I guess.*

"I'm sure we all can agree that the battle we fought yesterday was a tough, and quite brutal one," the ginger tom said clearly, "But, we

succeeded in what we had come to do, which was to claim a border that was rightfully ours."

Yowls of triumph then echoed throughout camp, and I couldn't help but join in.

Firestar waited for the yowls to die down before continuing. "Through the next few sunrises, we are going to make sure that this border is definitively ours by sending out frequent border patrols, once I am sure all of our cats are recovered, but for now..." Firestar stopped speaking, beginning to scan his eyes through the crowd of cats.

To my surprise, his green eyes stopped moving once they landed on right where me, Pippy and Dusty were sitting. "For now," he repeated, "I can do the honor of making two new warriors."

My mouth dropped, and I exchanged excited glances with the two former kittypets as they both gasped. *Oh my StarClan, I'm so excited for them!*

"No way!" Dusty breathed, blinking a few times as if to check that what he was experiencing was real.

"Are you joking?" Pippy practically squeaked.

As eruptions of laughter spread throughout the Clan, Firestar dipped his head and smiled. "No, I am not joking," he responded. As he lifted up his head back to look down at his Clan, he meowed, "These two fought incredibly bravely in the battle yesterday, and have showed constant dedication and determination throughout their apprenticeship in this Clan. I have no doubt that they are both meant to be ThunderClan warriors."

I gave the two siblings nudges as Firestar nodded to them. "Pippy and Dusty, can you please step forward?" He asked, leaping down gracefully from the Highledge.

Dusty and Pippy exchanged another ecstatic glance before doing as Firestar told them, stepping a few tail lengths ahead to meet the ThunderClan leader.

They're actually becoming warriors! I thought. *I bet I'm just as excited as they are!* I looked over to where Mousewhisker and Hazeltail were sitting, and saw their eyes glittering with pride for their apprentices.

Another excited shiver ran down my spine as I saw Firestar lift his head to the sky.

"I, Firestar, leader of ThunderClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these apprentices. They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as warriors in their turn."

He then looked down to meet the gazes of the two cats. First, he turned to Pippy. "Pippy, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend this Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Pippy didn't hesitate for even half a heartbeat. "I do," she meowed proudly and clearly.

"And Dusty," Firestar continued, "Do *you* promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend this Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Dusty nodded eagerly. "I do, Firestar, I really do!"

I, along with quite a few other cats, purred in amusement. *He's so cute.*

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you two your warrior names!" Firestar then paused, almost looking stunned for a moment. "Great StarClan, I haven't even asked you both if you would *like* warrior names?"

Pippy started jumping up and down while Dusty continued to nod quickly. "Is that even a question?" Pippy squeaked. "Of course we do!"

"I second that!" Dusty exclaimed.

Firestar let out a purr of amusement and dipped his head once again. "I figured that," he purred. He then turned back to Pippy.

"Pippy, from this moment on, you will be known as Nightwing. StarClan honors you for your spirit and perseverance, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan!"

"Nightwing!" I shouted out before any other cat could.

"Nightwing! Nightwing! Nightwing!" The Clan yowled proudly.

"And Dusty," Firestar began as soon as the yowls had faded, "From this moment on, you will be known as Dustystorm. StarClan honors you for your determination and loyalty, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan!"

I love that! I once again attempted to shout out the new warrior name before anyone else. "Dustystorm!"

"Dustystorm! Dustystorm! Dustystorm!"

I watched proudly as Firestar then touched his muzzle to both of the new warrior's heads, and they proceeded to lick his shoulder.

As soon as the ritual was done, I let out an excited squeal and ran up to the two new warriors as other cats began to go up and congratulate them.

"Nightwing and Dustystorm!" I repeated Firestar's names as I approached them. "What do you think?"

"I love it!" Pippy, no - Nightwing, exclaimed. I thought she was going to explode with how excited she was. She then turned to her brother. "Dusty, we're warriors now!"

"That's Dusty*storm*, thank you very much," Dustystorm teased, nudging Nightwing on the shoulder. "You're right, I'm a *warrior* now! *Respect* it!"

"Whatever!" Nightwing purred, starting to pad away as Hazeltail called her name. "I'll see you two!"

"Bye!" I called, watching her go for a few heartbeats before turning back to Dusty. My stomach twisted as I saw that he was staring at me, his eyes glittering as they always did. As I had turned back to

him, he had narrowed his eyes and let a huge smirk emerge on his face.

"So... " he began, still smirking. "What were you going to say to me before Firestar so *rudely* interrupted?"

I let out a purr of laughter as I looked down to the ground shyly. "Well..." I meowed, looking back up at Dustystorm, reflecting the smirk he was giving me. "I was going to ask you what you were going to say to *me*, rather..."

Dustystorm's eyes widened, but the big smirk on his face didn't go away. "Last night, you mean?"

He knows what I was talking about? I thought. *Maybe that does mean it was something important...*

Shyly, I gave him a nod, and Dustystorm's eyes softened as he beckoned his tail for me to follow him. My heart pounding so loudly that I thought he would hear, I followed Dustystorm to a comfortable spot near the camp entrance. *Oh my StarClan, is this really happening? I'm so nervous.*

It appeared as if Dustystorm was nervous too. After we sat down, there was no speaking for a few heartbeats. I actually just watched, purring with laughter as I watched Dustystorm try to find his words. I thought I could say with complete confidence where this conversation was going.

At least I hoped. I really, really hoped.

"So, Goldenshine, returning to last night..." he began, his gaze locking with mine. "I-I just wanted to thank you. R-really thank you so much for being so kind to Pippy and I as we got more comfortable in this Clan."

I nodded, simply waiting for him to go on.

"I mean, you were the first cat to come up and talk to us that night that Smudge brought us into your camp... and then you took us out on our first hunting trip, and then you gave me my first hunting lesson, which was so, *so* much fun."

He looks adorable when he rambles, I thought. "I was absolutely glad to do all of it, Dustystorm," I responded. "Some cats here aren't as keen on letting in kittypets, but I took a liking to you both almost as soon as I saw you for the first time. I knew that you all would fit in, I really did!"

Dustystorm's eyes sparkled as I spoke, and when I had finished, he dipped his head. "Thank you, really," he purred. "You've been such a great companion. I can't thank you enough."

"Of course, Dustystorm," I meowed kindly to him.

Starting to get a little nervous, I wondered, *is that all he wanted to say to me?*

I tried to search his gaze. There was gratitude there, and something else, but who knows what it could've been? I tried to fight the tugging disappointing that was appearing inside of me. *We've shared so many moments together... I thought we were going to be mates someday... but if he doesn't feel the same way, I'm not even going to bother telling him how I feel.*

Realizing that I would need to separate myself and deal with this heartbreak as soon as possible, I dipped my head in farewell to Dustystorm. "If that's all you need to say, I'd better go and see if Brambleclaw or Jayfeather need me for anything," I murmured, trying to sound happy despite the new sadness I was feeling.

"But that's *not* all I need to say," Dustystorm meowed teasingly, raising his tail as if to tell me to stop.

Oh my StarClan. "I-It's not?" I stammered, my stomach twisting all over again.

"Oh, Goldenshine, you should know that already," Dustystorm meowed softly, taking a step closer to me. My heart began beating double the speed as his warm scent flooded through my nose. He then touched his nose to mine as he purred and whispered, "I just wanted to pull your tail a little bit."

As he pulled away and I was able to look into his eyes, I was able to

figure out what that "something else" was that had been shining in his eyes. *Is that...?*

Dustystorm purred in amusement as I fell speechless. "Yes, Goldenshine, I wasn't lying when I said you were great for being here for the Nightwing and I, and being my companion and all, but..." He then took another step closer to me, and my heart wanted to explode as he wound his tail around mine. "But... you're *so* much more than that. To me."

"Oh, Dustystorm," I whispered, my stomach full of butterflies as our gazes burned into each other's. "You have no idea." *I love you*, I said to Dustystorm in my thoughts. But, before I could even say it to him out loud, he did it for me.

"I love you," he whispered, his blue eyes gleaming with just that.

Overwhelmed with love and happiness, I pressed my muzzle against Dustystorm's and let his scent waft through my nose once again. "I love you too, Dustystorm," I purred. "I love you so much." I then pulled away, and with our tails still twinned, Dustystorm put his head against mine. It felt as if we were sitting there together for seasons, but also just heartbeats before a meow came from behind me.

"Hey, there, Dustystorm!"

Startled, I whirled around to see my father, Thornclaw, padding up to us from a few tail lengths away. I felt a pang a fear rush through me. *Oh, no. Is Thornclaw going tell us he doesn't approve because Dustystorm was a kittypet? StarClan, no!*

But, to my relief, a smile was emerging on Thornclaw's face as he stopped in front of us. His eyes narrowed as he gave Dustystorm a small nudge on the shoulder with his tail. "Now, you had better treat my daughter well," he purred. "Hurt her, and it will be the last thing you ever do."

Dustystorm's widened eyes softened. He looked at me and then meowed, "Don't worry, Thornclaw," he murmured, smiling, "This she-cat deserves every possible good thing I could give her."

Thornclaw dipped his head, looking relieved. "Good," he meowed as he began to pad away. "If you ever think of her as anything less, you'll have me to deal with!"

Dustystorm and I erupted into laughter as Thornclaw disappeared into the crowd. Once he was out of sight, I turned to Dustystorm and nodded to the crowd of cats still gathered in the main clearing. "Hey, you've barely gotten to talk to any cat except me since you've become a warrior!" I realized, reaching out to touch my nose to his. "Go ahead and mingle with them for a while!"

As Dustystorm pulled away from touching my nose, he gave me a nod. "Sure thing!" He meowed before nudging me with his tail. "Let's go on a hunt later, just you and me?"

"I'd love that," I purred, feeling satisfied, as I didn't have to hide the huge smiles that came over me whenever I was around Dustystorm anymore. "I'll see you soon."

As I watched Dustystorm go, I felt myself becoming filled with a new sense of safety and optimism. *Things are crazy right now,* I admitted to myself, *with this battle being so fresh, Snowpaw's future, and... whatever's going on with Swiftpaw, but...*

I smiled and looked up at the sun that was slowly beginning to lower behind the trees. *But even though all of that is unknown, and... scary, I have my family, friends, and mate to endure it with me,* I realized.

As much as this gave me ease, I knew that these issues I was encountering would require a lot more than that. *That may be true, but no matter what, I'm going to figure all of this out, and I'll get through it.*

Letting out a sigh, I padded over to join Nightwing as she had grabbed a mouse from the fresh-kill pile and asked me to share.

Just as I was about to bend down and take a bite of the mouse, I froze as the same voice I had heard from last night echoed again in my mind, but my heart nearly stopped as I realized that one of the old words, along with a *new* word were the only ones being said

over and over.

Swiftpaw... revenge... Swiftpaw... revenge...

"Is something wrong, Goldenshine?" Nightwing asked, cutting off the voice. "You were staring off at nothing!"

I shook my head quickly and met Nightwing's concerned gaze. "Y-Yes," I lied, hoping she couldn't hear my heart beating. "Don't worry."

I almost was telling that to myself as much as Nightwing. *Swiftpaw... revenge...,* the voice kept repeating.

Whoever you are, keep your paws off of my son, I told the voice, not even knowing if it would hear me.

But, my heart nearly stopped as I heard an almost immediate response.

Too late.

Chapter 31

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

I was prickling with apprehension as I led Nightwing and Dustystorm through the forest as the sun slowly disappeared into the pink sky.

As reluctant as I was to go back to the Twoleg nest, Firestar had asked me to be the one to escort the two former-kittypets there to let them say goodbye to Smudge for the last time, and to tell him that they had finally become warriors.

As much as I wanted to think Firestar had just picked me because I was a little more familiar with the area, I couldn't help but wonder if he wanted to test my loyalties a little bit after the stupid Jerry encounter in ThunderClan camp. *I suppose I can't blame him for that,* I realized. *That stupid Jerry caused my dedication to ThunderClan to be questioned when, originally, I had no reason for it to be questioned at all!*

That is another reason why I was reluctant to return to my Twoleg nest. It would be nice to see Smudge again, but I could already tell that seeing *Jerry* again wouldn't do anything good for me.

I took a deep breath, trying to get that annoying, selfish tom out of my head as the three of us got further and further away from ThunderClan territory. Behind me, I could hear Dustystorm and Nightwing whispering about their warriors ceremony that had happened just earlier that day. And, my stomach twisted as I had heard them begin to talk about something else.

I had figured out something was going on when I had seen Goldenshine and Dustystorm talking earlier, but his and Nightwing's conversation now just confirmed it for me.

I couldn't help but smile at the realization. *It's about time,* I thought

to myself. *Every cat has seen how Dustystorm's been padding after my daughter for moons now!*

I was genuinely happy for them. But, of course, a mother will always get nervous when their kit pursues a new relationship. *But Dustystorm is an amazing tom. Goldenshine chose very well,* I thought proudly.

To my surprise, Thornclaw had been quite pleased as well. I had thought that he would at least be a little iffy, considering Dustystorm had been a kittypet for seasons before. But, I suppose Thornclaw liked Dustystorm and his personality as much as I did, as he had actually walked up to the two new mates and given them his blessing.

When he had arrived back to me, he even purred, "He's going to make her happy, don't you think?"

I had let out a *mrrow* of laughter and touched my mate's ear with my nose. "I don't doubt it," I answered happily.

But, something he hadn't been as fond of was the fact that I was going to be the one escorting Dustystorm and Nightwing to the Twoleg nest to say goodbye to Smudge and, well, *Jerry*.

"I trust you wholeheartedly, Lilypetal," he had meowed, "But... what if he tries to hold you captive? Or what if he follows you back here? What if-"

I had cut him off, pressing my muzzle against his. "How about none of the above?" I meowed teasingly, having echoed the words he had said to me after he had come out of a quarter moon of unconsciousness. I then pulled away from his muzzle so I could stare into his pale blue eyes. "Don't worry, Thornclaw. Whatever Jerry-"

Thornclaw let out a snort as I had been speaking. "You could do without saying his name," he muttered, rolling his eyes.

I purred with amusement and then continued. "Fine. Whatever *that tom* tries to do, it doesn't matter at all!"

"Why not? Lilypetal-"

Before Thornclaw could say any more, I had twinned my tail with his. "Because, you're the only cat I'll ever love," I whispered, my hazel gaze burning into his.

Thornclaw's worried eyes then softened. My head felt light as he then smiled at me gently and laid his muzzle on my head. "Me too," he whispered back.

I sniffed and meowed with laughter in my voice, "You're the only cat you'll ever love, huh?"

Thornclaw had snorted as he pulled his muzzle away from my head. He nudged me as he purred, "You know what I meant, mouse-brain!" My mate then had nodded his head towards the camp entrance. "Now go, before I decide to come with you and throw *that tom* into the lake!"

I purred once again and touched my nose to Thornclaw's in farewell. "I'll do it for you," I teased before I had joined Dustystorm and Nightwing at the entrance. The two of them had stormed through the entrance as soon as I had approached them. Before I followed them, I turned my head back around to see Thornclaw watching me go. My heart melted as I saw him mouth a clear "I love you" and "be safe" to me.

I had smiled at the ground before looking back up at my mate and mouthing back an "I love you too" and "I will".

Now, here I was, leading Nightwing and Dustystorm to the Twoleg nest. We had just barely made it out of ThunderClan territory when I heard Nightwing exclaim from behind me, "There it is!"

Surely enough, looking ahead I could see the very familiar greenleaf Twoleg nest just foxlengths ahead. I purred with amusement as Nightwing and Dustystorm pelted up the trail and towards the fence that I knew very well.

The very same fence that I stood on top of, trying to decide if I wanted to leap off of it and onto the other side.

More slowly and hesitantly, I followed the two cats. When I arrived next to them, I saw that they were already trying to call for Smudge and Jerry.

They better not lure any Twolegs out here, I thought nervously.

Luckily, just moments later, I heard the light pawsteps of only cats come from the other side of the fence, and immediately after that, the black and white pelt of Smudge appeared at the top of the fence.

"Lilypetal? Pippy? Dusty?" He exclaimed. "What are you all doing back?" His eyes then widened as an idea seemed to pop into his head. "Did you all decide that you all had made a mistake and that the kittypet life is simply the best?"

Dustystorm sniffed and answered, "Quite the opposite, actually." He and Nightwing exchanged an excited glance. "We're Dustystorm and Nightwing now!"

Smudge's eyes widened even more as he jumped down from the fence to join us. "You all are warriors now?" He asked, shocked. "Wow! Well, congratulations!"

"And Lilypetal is just here to escort us," Nightwing explained as her gaze saddened. "We're here to say goodbye..."

Before Smudge, or any cat, could say anything else, my heart sank as another familiar voice carried through the other side of the fence. "Did you say Lilypetal?"

I rolled my eyes as Jerry's dark ginger pelt appeared at the top of the fence. "Is she here?" He asked again.

Smudge gave me a sympathetic glance before looking up at Jerry. "Yes, she's here, Jerry," he answered. "But-"

I took a step back as Jerry then leaped down to our side of the fence. I let out a huff as the familiar narrowed eyes and smirk appeared on his face. "I see you thought about my proposal," he murmured.

I narrowed my eyes back at him. "Not even a little bit," I hissed. "I was *chosen* to bring these two back to say goodbye."

I was shocked to then see a small flash of hurt and disappointment in Jerry's blue eyes. *Wow... he actually was hoping I'd eventually come back and stay with him.*

Deciding I should let him down a little more easily, I took a deep breath, pulled Jerry a further away from the other cats, and put the tip of my tail on his shoulder.

"Listen, Jerry," I began, "I'm sorry, but my heart is with my Clan, and with someone else that I love with all of my heart. I, and other cats too, have *tried* to tell you that."

I was surprised to see Jerry nod slowly after a few heartbeats. "I know, I know," he meowed in a new tone I had never heard him speak in before. Usually he just sounded annoyingly smug. "It's just... you're a special cat, Lilypetal, and... nice to look at."

I rolled my eyes as he had said that last part.

Jerry continued, "I have been known to try a little too hard to get the things I want, and I ignore anything that might possibly get in my way."

"Hm. Like the fact that I already had a mate?" I inquired, narrowing my eyes again.

"Apparently so," the dark ginger tom answered before meowing begrudgingly, "I guess I need to learn some respect..."

"You guess?" I repeated, lashing my tail up in the air. "You *better!*"

"Heh, whatever," Jerry purred. He let out a long breath before continuing, "And listen, I know that your heart belongs with your Clan. I always have."

"Really?" I asked, tilting my head.

"Definitely," Jerry answered. "It may have looked like everything you said went in one ear and out the other-"

"You've got that right," I put in.

"-but I could see by the way that you talked about Clan life when I escorted you, and how you stood up for your place in the Clan when I came to your camp, that there is where you truly belong. I would say I was wasting my time if I didn't think you were so awesome."

I actually managed to let out a smile. "Well, thank you," I mewed. "I'm glad you understand."

"And don't worry, I'll stay out of your fur now," Jerry assured me, rolling his eyes. "But... tell that Thornclaw for me - he's incredibly lucky to be with a she-cat as dedicated, pretty and brave as you are."

I lashed my tail again with a *mrrow* of amusement. "If he ever forgets, I'll bring him to you!" I teased, before beginning to walk back to the other three cats, but before I could, Jerry started speaking again.

"And I hope you know how lucky you are, too," Jerry commented as I turned back to face him. "To find a mate that loves you as much as Thornclaw does. Back in your camp, I didn't show it, but I was scared he was going to kill me!"

I snorted. "He probably would have if he'd gotten the chance!" I purred. "And, I know I am," I meowed, responding to Jerry's earlier words. *I couldn't be happier with anyone else.*

Finally, Jerry and I turned to face Smudge, Nightwing and Dustystorm, who were giving their final goodbyes. After Smudge pulled away from touching noses with Dustystorm, he turned to face me. "So, Lilypetal," he began. "You sure that you wouldn't rather just stay here? There would be some warm food and a cozy bed inside waiting for you!"

I didn't hesitate with my answer. "As much as I appreciate the offer, Smudge, I have to say no," I meowed definitively. "I could never leave my friends, my family, and my mate. And I could never give up my duties to fight for and feed my Clan. And I'd miss the thrill of

catching my own food or fighting in battle." A rush of triumph and thrill rushed through me as I thought about the border battle, and how I was able to fight with my Clan to result in a tough, but needed win.

Just as I had been about to say something else, I stopped as a strange spasm suddenly ran through my belly, along with a moment of intense nausea. I let out a hiss of pain, the nausea going away.

"Lilypetal, are you okay?" Nightwing asked, concern glowing in her green eyes, along with everyone else.

Shaking out my fur, I nodded and answered, "Yes, don't worry. I'm probably just hungry!" *Yeah, that's probably all that was,* I thought to myself. *I haven't eaten since before their warriors ceremony at sunhigh!*

"If you're sure," Smudge then said, "Then I should probably let you all return to ThunderClan now."

"Bye, Smudge!" Nightwing exclaimed, touching her nose to Smudge's once again. She then turned to Jerry and meowed, "Bye!" As she touched her nose to his. Dustystorm gave curt nods to the both of them.

I then proceeded to dip my head to the both of them as well. "I wish you all well," I meowed kindly before following Nightwing and Dustystorm down the path.

"Remember to tell Thornclaw what I said!" I heard Jerry call out.

I slowed down and gave the ginger tom another nod with a smile. *When Jerry isn't making me want to claw his muzzle off, he's not too bad of a cat! I wish him well.*

As I continued to travel, I let the two new warriors run ahead of me as I enjoyed the sights of the forest. Leaf-fall was pretty much here, and the leaves were beginning to fall from many of the trees.

What cat could ever life under a Twoleg roof when they could enjoy this?

As I stared up at the sky that was beginning to be filled with

StarClan warriors, I let out another hiss as a second spasm hit my stomach, harder than the first one. *What in the name of StarClan is going on? This never happens to me when I'm hungry*, I realized.

Although a little nervous, I continued to pad through the forest. As I thought about these spasms, I began to realize something.

The spasms weren't necessarily painful, but they simply felt like pressure. *It's... a pressure I felt like I've experienced before, but where?* I wondered. *Wait...* My ears flicked as an actualization popped into my head and a purr began to rumble in my throat. *Am I...?*

Before I could come to any conclusions, I found myself stopping in my place.

I suddenly felt an overwhelming feeling of being watched.

Dustystorm and Nightwing were far ahead of me, and I could still hear their ecstatic meows coming from up ahead. I gaped my mouth open to try and catch any scents, but there were none, not from any Clan. *I hope Jerry didn't follow me back or something,* I realized.

But I already knew that wasn't the case, because the chilling gaze that I almost felt on me felt all too familiar.

Before I could do some searching, trying to see if my premonitions were wrong, I heard a very clear voice. At first, I looked around to see where it could've possibly come from, but it didn't take me long to realize that the voice was inside my head. I knew I wasn't crazy, I'll say that already.

Things may be looking up right now, Lilypetal, the familiar voice hissed, *but I have plans...*

"Go away, Ashfur," I muttered out loud, shaking my head quickly to try and "get rid of him".

I have plans, he repeated. *Not just plans for you, but for your kin... for the Clan... for the whole forest.*

"Not on my watch," I hissed, trying my hardest to ignore Ashfur and his ominous voice. As I arrived to the camp entrance, I paused,

looked up at the Silverpelt sky and whispered to him.

"I'm ready to take on whatever you throw at me."

Chapter 32

[image]

Swiftpaw's POV

"Tell me about the battle all over again!"

"Were you ever scared?"

"Did anyone try to kill you?"

My patience was definitely being tested as Cherrykit and Molekit had seemed to want to do nothing but ask me about the battle since it had happened.

It had been almost two days now. Currently, Snowpaw and I were sharing a vole near the fresh-kill pile while Cherrykit and Molekit basically circled us, asking me constant questions. Snowpaw had been answering them for me mostly, because I had managed to give her the full story, while I growled and rolled my eyes.

I had to admit, I was growing a bit of a big head, considering that I was trying to act like now that I was an apprentice, Cherrykit and Molekit were "lower" than I was, and that I didn't necessarily need to give them my time.

Unfortunately though, Cherrykit and Molekit seemed to notice more and more that I wasn't putting my word in. "Swiftpaw!" Cherrykit exclaimed. "Snowpaw's already told us about the battle. Tell us *your* point of view."

I let out an annoyed huff. *For some reason I feel like I can't say no...* I thought as I looked into Cherrykit's eager eyes. "Fine," I muttered, trying to sound as enthusiastic as possible. "I have to admit, just before the battle, I was pretty nervous."

"I could tell!" Snowpaw commented. "When I was walking up to you to wish you luck, I tripped on my own paws and fell on my face,

but you didn't say a word!"

"Maybe I just didn't care?" I teased to Snowpaw before going on. "Anyways, once the battle started, it was absolute chaos. I feel like cats noticed that I was pretty young to be put into a battle, so they seemed to go for me."

"What did you do?" Molekit asked with wide eyes.

I couldn't suppress a smile as I saw how captivated Cherrykit and Molekit looked. "Well, I just gave it everything that I had! It took me a bit, since some of the cats I fought were bigger than I was, but I managed to fight them off. I even helped Lilypetal scare off Tawnypelt!"

"Wow!" Cherrykit squealed.

"I know! Then, when things seemed to be getting tense, Brambleclaw came up with a really smart plan," I continued, becoming more and more animated the more I noticed the two kits were getting into my story. "ThunderClan created a second patrol that attacked ShadowClan from the trees, and it completely threw their warriors off of track!"

"And then you won, right?" Molekit asked excitedly.

"Heck yes, we did!" I exclaimed. "But it was a tough battle. I don't know if some of the bloodshed was worth it, to be honest."

I wasn't sure if I should have been so honest with Snowpaw, Cherrykit and Molekit, but it was how I felt. Now that I knew that it had been Tigerstar's plan all along to get this battle to happen, I wondered if his intentions were truly good. *Because of this battle, Firestar lost a life, and ShadowClan lost their deputy. Is this what the Dark Forest wanted? I highly doubt that Ivypaw actually received a sign from StarCla. Tigerstar had said he was discussing something with a Dark Forest apprentice. There's no reason why it all couldn't be true.*

The thoughts almost disturbed me so much, that I tried to ignore them and pretend that there was another underlying good reason that I just wasn't as aware of. The fact that ThunderClan had won

made me feel a little better about all of it, at least.

"But at least you won!" Cherrykit squealed, echoing my thoughts. "And everything's okay now!"

I wish I could say that.

After taking one last bite of the vole Snowpaw and I had shared, I let out a huge yawn and took a stretch.

"Great StarClan, you must be tired!" Snowpaw meowed, yawning immediately after I had. "Healing after fighting in a battle doesn't just happen overnight."

"You're definitely right about that," I commented, glancing down at the healing gash on my shoulder. Although I'd be able to continue with normal apprentice duties, Jayfeather was having to keep a close "eye" on it, and would for a while. "I'm going to go to sleep."

"Me too," Snowpaw commented as she began to observe my leg. "But are you sure you shouldn't stop by to see Jayfeather for a moment? Your wound is healing really well, but another poultice on it might do you some good. It might heal even faster."

"How in the name of StarClan do you know so much about medicine stuff?" I asked after having yawned a second time. "It's not like any other warrior or apprentice in this Clan would be able to tell me the progress of my wounds!"

Snowpaw stared off for a few heartbeats, seemingly deep in thought, before shrugging. "I really don't know," she answered me. "I guess I just have it in me somewhere, I just don't know *how*."

I narrowed my eyes as I then asked Snowpaw, "Do you regret becoming a warrior apprentice?"

"No *way!*" Snowpaw replied. "I know that I'm meant to be a warrior. I have no idea why I can look at wounds and know what they mean or know what herb to apply to a wound. At least maybe I can use it if Jayfeather needs any extra help in the future."

"True," I agreed, yawning a third time. "Well, if you think I need

another poultice, I think I'm just going to get it tomorrow. I'd fall asleep before Jayfeather was even finished with me."

"If you say so," Snowpaw answered before beginning to pad towards the apprentice's den, me following behind.

I crawled inside of the apprentice's den to see that Snowpaw had practically let herself drop into her nest. "You're *that* tired?" I exclaimed. "Why are you so tired? I fought in a *battle* yesterday!"

"Maybe I'm tired after being with you, you bragging mouse-brain!" Snowpaw teased before adjusting to a more comfortable position and wrapping her tail around her nose.

"Whatever, you bully!" I purred as I settled down into my nest. "I'm sleeping for a moon!"

"Have fun with that!"

"Heh, goodnight."

"Goodnight."

Letting out an exhausted huff, I let myself close my eyes, and watched as I drifted off into the darkness.

I almost hope that Ashfur won't be too tough on me tonight, I thought. *I really am so tired after the battle yesterday... but I don't think he'd care if I'd shredded an army of badgers with my own two paws yesterday.*

As the surroundings of a forest began to appear around me, I mentally prepared myself for an exhausting night of mock battling ahead.

As the forest became clear and full around me, I lifted my head up and began to look around, expecting to find Ashfur in front of me immediately.

But, he was nowhere in sight.

No one was, in fact.

"Hello?" I called out, scanning every direction. *Where is everyone? Did I maybe wake up in the wrong clearing or something?* "Hello?" I called out once more.

Still no answer.

Deciding that I *was* probably in the wrong clearing, I starting walking in a random direction to see if I could manage to find anyone.

Thank StarClan this is just in my dreams, I thought. *I'd be much more scared if I were to get lost in a real forest!*

I took so many twists and turns, and eventually I found myself facing a trail covered with sticks and leaves, along with lots of puddles. *This is the trail that Tigerstar and Ashfur took me on to get to the other Dark Forest cats!* I realized. Feeling a little more at ease now, I began to follow it.

Luckily, the deeper down the trail I went, the more audible some voices became up ahead. *I've found them!*

I began to run as quickly as I could towards the meows that I was hearing, expecting to just run into a bunch of cats training together.

As I got really close, I was able to make out the words being said.

"He's been training here for *moons* now, Ashfur! When are you going to take some sort of action?"

I skidded to a halt as I heard this. Although I had stopped and wasn't running any more, my heart began beating faster than it had been when I was running. *Who was that? Are... are they talking about me?* I quickly leaped into a bush, and then tried to be as quiet as I could while I listened.

"Him being here is already taking action! I don't know what you're talking about," I heard the familiar voice of Ashfur hiss.

"It's not like you *actually* brought him here just to give him a head start, right?" I heard Tigerstar growl.

My heart felt like it had dropped when I heard Ashfur growl back. "Of course not! But Swiftpaw doesn't know that!"

They are talking about me.

"Well, if you're not doing this out of the kindness of your heart," a third cat asked, "then what was your plan here all along?"

"I'm not quite sure yet," Ashfur answered. "I mean, you all know why I'm doing this. I just need to think up exactly *how*."

"There's many options! Think!" A fourth cat hissed. "You've been able to manipulate the little mouse-brain a lot already. Imagine what more you could do with that! You almost got him to get himself killed in the forest with that fox!"

I felt my heart skip a beat.

"Yeah! In fact, that leaves you with two options right there," the third cat I had heard meowed. "You could manipulate him further into doing what you want, or, you could send him into more danger and get him actually killed this time!"

W-What? Why are they talking about killing *me?* As I began to shake with immense fear, I heard Ashfur meow. "Just killing him would be too easy. That wouldn't fulfill my plan in the way I want."

Plan? I repeated to myself. *What plan?*

"You could kill him into the Dark Forest," Tigerstar put in. "His kin would be grieving for seasons by how sudden it was, and once they saw that he was here, they'd be even more heartbroken!"

I thought I was going to reveal my spot by how loudly my heart was beating and how much I was shaking.

"Maybe," Ashfur muttered. "Like I said, I'm not sure yet. I don't think I want to kill him, at least not any time soon."

"But-" I heard the fourth cat stammer.

"You're right, Ashfur," Tigerstar murmured. "Lots of harm can still

be done while he is alive..."

Where is all of this coming from? Why are they talking about what to do to me? Do they do this with all of the cats they train here? I wondered, delving quickly into complete panic for the second time in my whole life. *What do I do?*

"You all had better be careful," the third cat, who I then realized was Hawkfrost, muttered. "Swiftpaw could arrive here any moment and hear what you're saying."

Too late for that, I thought, still feeling petrified.

"Right," Ashfur murmured. I then heard him begin to pad on the trail next to me. I froze as he then meowed, "Why do I smell him already?"

Hoping that Ashfur or Tigerstar wouldn't find me here and realize I had been eavesdropping, I slid as quietly as I could from the bushes and proceeded to walk to the nearest clearing I saw, making sure to stay low.

Ashfur seemed to have found me as soon as I had arrived there. I nearly flinched as he spoke to me. I hoped he couldn't see that I was still shaking.

"Hello, there, Swiftpaw," he meowed in a suddenly very warm voice, unlike the one I had heard earlier. "Wonderful job in the battle, yesterday."

I turned towards Ashfur. I felt myself beginning to bubble with anger and fear as I looked at him.

This whole time he has been lying to me. He and *Tigerstar have been lying to me. They don't want to help me at all! They have helped me, but not because they want to.*

A shiver ran down my spine as I then thought, *they're using me for something, but... I don't know what.*

As Ashfur began to explain a new battle move to me, I was barely listening, partly because I was worried that he would leap out and

kill me at any moment, and partly because I was still working on unfolding everything that was going on in my mind.

If I don't say anything, they could kill me, I realized. *But... if I say anything, they would definitely kill me.*

My eyes then began to open to all of the other things I had been blind to since I had been training here. *All of their kind words to me were just to get me to stay here so they could proceed on with their plan. Thornclaw's near-death wasn't my fault at all. In fact, I may face a similar fate if I get in their way just as he did.*

I am trapped.

Unfortunately, I knew that I had already made my choice. Now I figured that if I said "no" to anything that Ashfur said, it could be the end of me.

I still had no idea why I was the pawn of their terrible plan, and why it involved possibly *killing* me, but all I knew was that there was nothing at all I could do to save myself.

At least, I didn't know in that moment.

THE END

Author's Note

Oh. My. StarClan. I can't believe that this book is over. If you all have made it this far, I cannot thank you enough! Thank you all for supporting me in all four of my books!

I also apologize for ending on a cliffhanger once again. I love doing that, hehe.

This fourth book was definitely the rockiest for me. The other three books felt a little easier to commit to because I was writing them in middle school and early high school, when I wasn't nearly as BUSY.

So, you all may have noticed that between Chapter 7 and Chapter 8 of this book, there was an entire gap of a year that I didn't update. It was actually thanks to quarantine that I picked this book up again, and I COULD NOT be more thankful that I did.

That's why writing this one was rocky, because finding the time to actually write it was tough, but I actually enjoyed writing this one I think more than any of the others (Shifting Shadows is a very close second, if not tied).

But that may change, because yes - I will be writing a fifth and sixth book! I am trying to write a typical Warrior Cats arc with six books, so two more books are on the way in this series!

Now that this book is officially done (ahhh I can't believe it!) I am going to start planning the next one, and probably start posting it late this month or early next month! I will update everyone on when exactly that will happen!!

To close, thank you all so much for reading this book and sticking with me. You all are the best!!

Also: all original Warrior Cats characters and plotlines belong to Erin Hunter.

Annnnddd and I guess Lilypetal, Goldenshine, Swiftpaw, Snowflight, Mistpelt, Dustystorm, Nightwing and Jerry belong to me!

Goodness, I have a lot of OCs now😂 anyway...

~ may StarClan light your path ~

- warriorcatlover345

New Book!

[image]

Hey guys!

I know that this book is complete, but as of last night, I have started updating the fifth book in this series - **Warriors #5: Heart of Fire**! So, if you enjoyed THIS book, and you want more of our lovely protagonists Lilypetal, Goldenshine and Swiftpaw, feel free to check out the successor!

~ may StarClan light your path ~

- warriorcatlover345